

On Tragedy and Transcendence: A Critical Exposition of Donald MacKinnon and Rowan Williams in the Context of a Modern Debate

By

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Declaration

By submitting this thesis, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the authorship owner thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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Abstract:

This dissertation is focused on the relation between Christian metaphysics and philosophies of the tragic. Its context is within a modern debate, a setting where this interrelation has become contested. Its research question can be phrased so: can a classical account of transcendence account for ‘the tragic’? Or to put the question from the other side: are there grammars of transcendence associated with ‘the tragic’ (here understood as a metaphysical or philosophical trope) that hinder the reception of ‘tragedy’ within orthodox theology? For the purposes of this study, such a question becomes concretized within the debate around the critical reception of Donald MacKinnon, particularly amongst David Bentley Hart and John Milbank.

The core argument of this dissertation proposes that the most pointed tension within this controversy is centered on the language of transcendence, and how Christian orthodoxy has traditionally conceptualized it (e.g. aseity, the *analogia entis*, the transcendental convertibility of goodness and oneness, etc.). It also suggests that there are refractions of ‘the tragic’ and ‘transcendence’ within the modern period that have created problems for the interrelations of a classical-orthodox metaphysics and the tragic. We specifically note three incarnations within the modern period, namely: *the Kantian sublime*, *the suffering Absolute*, and *a rejection of the privatio boni*. All of these concepts are related to the question of ‘the tragic’ in the contemporary debate, and also have application to the discussion of MacKinnon, as seen in the critical responses to his work we will be addressing.

This study hopes to move the conversation forward by engaging in a critical exposition of Donald MacKinnon and Rowan Williams within the context of this contemporary discussion. The research suggests that MacKinnon’s insightful commentary on the interconnections between metaphysics and the tragic is marred by a strong dependence on Kantianism, as well as some misguided attacks on the Augustinian account of evil. Thereafter, this study wagers that Rowan Williams provides a corrective supplementation to MacKinnon: he adopts MacKinnon’s emphases on taking tragedy in complete seriousness, while simultaneously transcending several drawbacks associated with MacKinnon’s approach. This can be seen in the way that Williams is able to incorporate a deep sense of historicity and the tragic within a robust metaphysics of *creativity*, *language* and *analogy*. Moreover, he offers a defense of aseity, analogical participation and the *privatio boni* in a manner that exhibits a coherency with a sense of the tragic. Overall, we desire to make a contribution to the conversation by placing MacKinnon’s and Williams’s reflections on the tragic within their wider theological projects, hereby developing the argument that classical orthodoxy is able to sustain, with integrity, a vision that includes tragedy within it.

Opsomming:

In hierdie verhandeling val die klem op die verhouding tussen Christelike metafisika en filosofiese sienings van tragedie. Hierdie verhouding het in 'n moderne konteks opnuut bestrede geword. Die navorsingsvraag sou dus soos volg geformuleer kon word: kan 'n klassieke benadering tot transendensie rekening hou met 'die tragiese'? Die vraag sou ook andersom gestel kon word: bestaan daar grammatikas van transendensie waarin die verhouding tot 'die tragiese' (in die sin van 'n metafisiese of filosofiese groep) weerstand bied teen die resepsie van 'tragedie' binne die ortodokse teologie? In belang van hierdie studie word die navorsingsvraag konkreet toegespits in die debat rondom die kritiese resepsie van Donald MacKinnon se werk, veral onder denkers soos David Bentley Hart en John Milbank.

Die kern-argument van hierdie verhandeling is dat die bogenoemde twispunt die duidelikste na vore tree rondom die taal van transendensie; by name, hoe transendensie tradisioneel deur die Christelike ortodoksie gekonseptualiseer is (byvoorbeeld, aseïteit, die *analogia entis*, die transendentale verruilbaarheid van 'goedheid' en 'eenheid' ens.). Daar word ook beweer dat sekere moderne afstammelinge van 'die tragiese' en 'transendensie' probleme veroorsaak vir die verhouding tussen 'n klassiek-ortodokse metafisika en tragedie as kunsvorm. Wat dit betref word drie voorbeelde in die moderne periode aangedui, naamlik: *die Kantiaanse subliem*, *die lydende Absoluut*, en *die verwerping van die privatio boni*. In die huidige debat staan al drie van hierdie konsepte in verhouding tot die vraag na 'die tragiese' so wel as die bespreking van MacKinnon – soos duidelik sal word in die kritiese reaksies op MacKinnon se werk wat ons sal bespreek.

Deur 'n kritiese eksposisie van Donald MacKinnon en Rowan Williams voor te lê, beoog hierdie studie om die gesprek binne die bogenoemde konteks te bevorder. Die ondersoek stel voor dat MacKinnon se insiggewende kommentaar op die verhouding tussen metafisika en tragedie belemmer word deur 'n sterk afhanklikheid van Kantianisme, so wel as 'n aantal ongegronde aanvalle op die Augustiniaanse verstaan van die bose. In die lig hiervan, beweer hierdie studie dat Rowan Williams 'n korrektief bied op MacKinnon: in ooreenstemming met MacKinnon beklemtoon Williams dat tragedie met algehele erns aanvaar behoort te word; tegelykertyd slaag hy daarin om 'n aantal tekortkominge wat met MacKinnon se benadering verband hou die hoof te bied. Die waarde van Williams se bydrae kom veral na vore in die manier waarop hy dit regkry om 'n diepgaande waardering vir 'historisiteit' en 'die tragiese' met 'n sterk metafisika van *kreatiwiteit*, *taal* en *analogie* te versoen. Verder nog, kry Williams dit reg om 'n verdediging van aseïteit, analogiese deelname en die *privatio boni* te bied wat coherent bly met 'n waarderende sin vir die tragiese. Deur op hierdie manier MacKinnon en Williams se nadenke oor die tragiese binne die breë raamwerk van hulle teologiese projekte te plaas, hoop ons om die argument te bevorder dat 'n klassieke ortodoksie goed geleë is om 'n teologiese visie wat die tragiese insluit met integriteit te dra en te onderhou.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. The Scope

Broadly-speaking, the argument of this dissertation is premised on the interconnections between Christian metaphysics and the philosophy of the tragic, and the purported tensions that arise in their juxtaposition. More specifically, it is centered on ‘transcendence’, and how a more ‘classical’ or ‘orthodox’ metaphysics is able to account for ‘the tragic’. A relationship between these discourses cannot be assumed to be harmonious, and so it is our task to suggest why this might be the case, and how they could be reconciled. Its central argument is that there are accounts of transcendence that hinder an appropriation of ‘the tragic’, at least as regards classical theology. This is exemplified in the contemporary debate between, on the one side, David Bentley Hart and John Milbank, and on the other, Donald MacKinnon and Rowan Williams. It is this particular debate, and its wider context, that will form the center of this study. Our trajectory is not concerned, primarily, with a Christian metaphysics *in toto* but rather with a specific tradition, that is, with what could be called a ‘classical orthodoxy’.¹ It is

¹ In our sense, ‘orthodoxy’ has a special linkage to the classical tradition and the question of transcendence (e.g. aseity, *analogia entis*, etc.). But in our discussion it will also have an implicit connection to other *regula fidei* throughout – the Ecumenical Creeds, creation, salvation, atonement, the centrality of Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the trinity of God, and the beatitude of life everlasting. And yet, there is another conception of ‘orthodoxy’ presumed also, one which works at a meta-structure, and not simply at the level of the confession of specific dogmas. Here as elsewhere, our conception is influenced by Rowan Williams: this position does not equate ‘orthodoxy’ with a carapaced traditionalism or conservatism – as if we could somehow reprimatinate a bygone era *without* changing the meaning of the tradition in the process. Williams’s account is *not* concerned with this variety of conservatism. His account is an open-ended, humble – even kenotic – account of the handing-over of church tradition, one that includes the necessity of fabrication and invention within the continuation of ecclesial identity. Expounding on these themes, one could suggest that ‘orthodoxy’, or ‘traditioned creativity’ (to use Jeffrey McCurry’s terms), implies both the *faithful* transmission and the *imaginative* continuation of the church’s identity – *faithful* because it is attentive to the church’s historical and spiritual identity, and *imaginative* because it knows that the art of continuation cannot be achieved without the risks and joys of re-thinking the tradition within changing contexts. For more details on this, see Rowan Williams, ‘What is Catholic Orthodoxy?’ in Rowan Williams and Kenneth Leech (eds.), *Essays Catholic and Radical* (London: Bowerdean, 1983), 11-25; Williams, ‘Does it Make Sense to Speak of a Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?’ in Rowan Williams (ed.), *The Making of Orthodoxy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1-23; Williams, ‘The Nicene Heritage,’ in James M. Byrne (ed.), *Christian Understanding of God Today* (Dublin: Columbia, 1993), 45-48; Williams, ‘The Seal of Orthodoxy: Mary and the Heart of Christian Doctrine,’ in Martin Warner (ed.), *Say Yes to God: Mary and the Revealing of the Word Made Flesh* (London: Tufon, 1999), 15-29; Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (rev. ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), and esp. 1-25; 233-245. For secondary literature, see Jeffrey McCurry, *Traditioned Creativity: On Rowan Williams and the Grammars of Theological Practice* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 2006); Benjamin Myers, ‘Disruptive History: Rowan Williams on Heresy and Orthodoxy,’ in Matheson Russell (ed.), *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays* (Eugene: Cascade, 2009), 47-67; Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London – New York: T& T Clark, 2012), 43-49. More generally, see

this point of departure that will inflect our language of ‘transcendence’, and how we relate ‘the tragic’ to its contours. By working within a more classical tradition of Christian metaphysics, I am going forward with specific assumptions in regard to the nature of God and the matrix of beliefs connected to it. Here the language of ‘transcendence’ is particularly emphasized as being central to the grammar of classical orthodoxy, and therefore accrues an elevated place in this discussion. Consequently, this adopted framework provokes special challenges to conceptual reconciliation – or what could be called systematic coherency – which will need to be addressed if we are going to try and relate the classical language of transcendence to ‘the tragic’ and the overtones it has accrued, especially in recent times.

Both ‘transcendence’ and ‘tragedy’ are multivalent and require longer expositions, but here already we can parse definitions. For instance, we see that the language of ‘transcendence’ often concerns configurations of liminality associated with transition, as seen in the mundane intersections between past, present and future. Additionally, ‘transcendence’ references those experiences which frustrate reduction, those moments of wonder and terror, where the sensibilities are overloaded and destabilized. They signify an *intractability* or *non-negotiability* within the world, indicating those events that transport us or shock us into new modes of awareness – the tragic included. As we will come to see later, ‘tragedy’ is an example of this phenomenological resistance, precisely to the degree it reveals what cannot be repressed or evaded, namely, the world’s untameability. But ‘transcendence’ also betokens realities that are *not* experienceable in the ordinary sense of the term, and are rather concerned with questions of *meaning*, with that which *creates* experience (that is, religions, myths, philosophy, etc.). In this sense, we can speak of experiences as having a ‘metaphysical’ or even ‘transcendental’ scope.² Furthermore, in our study, ‘transcendence’ is placed within the context of a classical account of Christian language regarding ‘divine being’ (e.g. aseity, impassibility, analogical ‘participation’,³ the convertibility of being and goodness),⁴ with the aim of showing that this tradition expresses a level of penetration that is not often recognized by revisionists. These questions will come into focus, especially when we discuss the work of Rowan Williams.

David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

² Though not to be equated here with the Kantian sense of the term, as we will see later.

³ By ‘participation’, I am referring to that ‘constitutive structure whereby a being or beings share to varying degrees in a positive quality or perfection that they receive from a donating source that alone enjoys the fullness of this quality of perfection,’ in Jacob H. Sherman, ‘A Genealogy of Participation,’ in Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman (eds.), *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2008), 81-112 (p. 82).

⁴ A description of this metaphysical vision can be found in David Bentley Hart, ‘No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility’, ‘The Destiny of Christian Metaphysics: Reflections on the *Analogia Entis*’, ‘The Hidden and the Manifest: Metaphysics after Nicea,’ in *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 45-69; 97-112; 137-164 resp.

To state it concisely, our research question can be summarized like this: can a classical doctrine of transcendence account for the seriousness and particularity of tragedy? This main question implies sub-questions which will have to be addressed also, such as: are there conflicts between them? And if there are, where do they lie? Are they substantial or the product of miscomprehension? As we progress, a couple of these tensions will become more apparent: on the one hand, there could be a query about whether classical metaphysics takes ‘tragedy’ seriously, since (as has often been prosecuted) it absconds from ‘historicity’.⁵ Such interrogation might conclude that such language operates more like an ‘ideology’ rather than a responsible discourse. On the other hand, an objection might arise regarding the acceptance of ‘the tragic’ or ‘tragic theology, since respondents could argue that such an acceptance implies a rejection or limitation of Christian ‘orthodoxy’. In summary: one could argue either that the implications of tragedy should be curtailed or re-imagined – because it remains too disturbing – or one should reject ‘classical orthodoxy’ as an unnecessary hindrance.

And yet the question remains: are these the only two options available, acceptance or rejection? As we hope to show, we think the answer should be a qualified no, thus suggesting a third way beyond the extremes of simple acceptance or rejection. But to do this, several things will have to be accounted for: (1) it will have to argue that Christianity, even in its more traditional variety, is not opposed to the tragic, and is able to account for the challenges it proposes. For the purposes of our study, it will do so by localizing this tension on an area of deep importance for ‘the classical orthodox tradition’, namely, its grammar of transcendence. In this way, it provides a node of concentration for what is a daunting and complex tradition; but will also show how the language of transcendence impacts on our reception of the tragic. (2) It will have to express sensitivity to the aporias of contingency, since it is precisely these factors which give the tragic its edge. And (3), it will also need to demythologize certain entrenched perspectives on ‘the tragic’, which for understandable reasons are often associated with the unremittingly catastrophic. It needs to address these concerns because if they remain in place, they express an incompatibility with a Christian account of redemption. As regards our argument, we will suggest that a MacKinnonesque position, as modified by Williams, is one that is able to address these concerns, insofar as it takes historicity and tragedy seriously within a more-or-less orthodox position, while simultaneously addressing the particularity of

⁵ On ‘historicity’, see Reinhart Koselleck, “Space of Experience” and “Horizon of Expectation”: Two Historical Categories,’ in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 255-275; François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and the Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), David Carr, ‘On Historicity’. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 37.2 (2016): 273-288. For a more theological perspective, see Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963); Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005).

tragic experience. In this study, we hope to see if such compatibility is a workable and coherent one within the theological assumptions here adopted.

Returning to the over-arching tensions as regards ‘tragedy’ and ‘transcendence’, it appears beneficial to anticipate some of our arguments in their enfleshment, so that we can concretize some of the debates we are referencing. On the one hand, one can see that a ‘transcendence’ which avoids historicity evades the problem, since finitude – in theatre and in life – remains an essential trait of the tragic; any theology which avoided this factor would remain unable to address or absorb the insights of tragedy. In terms of an ‘orthodox’ response, one would then have to show that aseity and ‘the analogy of being’⁶ are not opposed to the experience of time and development. On the other hand, if history and its tragic outcomes are transcendentalized then this produces conclusions which a classical theology would want to caution against. As we suggest later, a traditional or classically-orthodox metaphysics would reject three interrelated revisions that are occasioned by this acceptance: namely, *the concept of a suffering God*, *the rejection of evil-as-privation*, and *the (post)modern aesthetics of the sublime*. Of course, in a genealogical perspective these are distinct phenomena that have arisen in different stages, and so are not reducible to each other. But it is nevertheless argued,⁷ that they are connected and converge within their substance. For instance, it argues that *the concept of a suffering God* ultimately ‘ontologizes’ suffering and evil,⁸ and that this move has metaphysical implications, insofar as it tacitly opposes *evil-as-privation*. Firstly, this is because the transcendent good is conceived as mutable and therefore not infinite, as modified or placed ‘over-against’ contingency and evil; and, secondly, evil is granted a status of its own that is independent of the Good, since it exists as ‘something’ to be absorbed, whereas classically-orthodox metaphysics has asserted that evil has no existence of its own. On this account, evil or suffering becomes a ‘good’ in itself, replete with a distinct existence, being no longer reducible to an ontological perversion. This revision, moreover, renders ‘Being’ as good and evil (e.g. Manichaeism), or as ‘beyond good and evil’ (e.g. Nietzschean-postmodern tragic sublime⁹), since once you ascribe a discrete ‘existence’ to evil, then ‘evil’ becomes an expression of ‘Being’. Once ‘evil’ and ‘suffering’ are given a non-parasitic ‘existence’ – to the extent that they *are* in a univocal sense to other existents – then this grants them an independence that is equal with the Good. This is irreconcilable with a classical metaphysics

⁶ Especially after Aquinas, Catholic theology has tended to read ‘transcendence’ within an analogical metaphysics that conjectures a participation of finite being within God’s infinite act of being. This does not imply a reduction of God to finitude, but rather a similarity within an ever-greater dissimilarity.

⁷ Rowan Williams’s arguments in this regard which will be detailed in Chapter Three and Chapter Seven.

⁸ This is not to say that *all* suffering is reducible to evil. There are varieties of suffering which are linked to the natural impingements of finitude, and are by-no-means evil as such.

⁹ See Simon Critchley, ‘The Tragical Sublime,’ in Donald Loose (ed.), *The Sublime and Its Teleology: Kant—German Idealism—Phenomenology* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 169-185.

which says that the Good is convertible with Infinite Being. If one accords ‘being’ to evil, then it is hard to avoid an equiprimordiality of evil with the good. It is this conclusion that suggests there is an *ontological pessimism* within such a tragic vision, since now ‘Being’ is severed from any special affinity to the Good, a move which promotes an ‘ontological violence’ and a politics based on the irreconcilability of human goods (à la Hobbesian liberalism).¹⁰ And it is this ‘pessimism’ – as witnessed in the writings of George Steiner – that supports ideas of unrelenting disaster as belonging to the essentially ‘tragic’, and buttresses arguments that Christianity and the tragic are finally opposed.¹¹

It is at this moment that the debate between our main discussion partners becomes intelligible. All of them, Hart and Milbank, MacKinnon and Williams, serve as representatives of theological orthodoxy, specifically as regards the theme of transcendence. However, it is the differences between them as regards the tragic that require explanation; such an explanation pivots around MacKinnon, and the others’s responses to him, since (as becomes clear) he is a figure central to the *modern*¹² theological debate surrounding ‘the tragic’. It is in the critical reception of his work, and the particular tradition he mediates (e.g. Kantianism), that many of the key contentions will be adjudicated.

However, it appears helpful to speak briefly regarding method and my own situatedness in this argument. In this section, we will draw upon Vincent Brümmer and Rowan Williams.

1.2. On Beginning in the Middle

A word on method and assumptions: as a theologian, one has to begin somewhere, and that ‘somewhere’ – as Rowan Williams has suggested – is ‘the middle of things’.¹³ One begins where one is at, where one is located, within all the ‘middles’ this implies. Any theology is ‘placed’ and cannot pretend otherwise; even the most systematic or interlaced arrangement can never be ‘self-referential’ or ‘auto-poetic’.¹⁴ One should emphasize this once more: theologies arise within contexts and the interplay between locations and their informing

¹⁰ Here my argument is in large agreement with the work of John Milbank and others (e.g. Adrian Pabst). However, it should be said that this is not an exclusive explanation; there is a multitude of causation, both historical and intellectual, for any political tradition.

¹¹ As regards ‘tragedy’ as such, we are not bound to this schema. For in Hegel’s reading (as read by Rowan Williams) tragic conflict is not a question of irresolvable dualities, but rather ‘one-sidedness’. ‘Goods’ are not mutually opposed, as in the usual reading. Instead, they are misrecognized as being ultimate. ‘Reconciliation’ is about learning to recognize my good as bound to yours, and it is the refusal of this that occasions tragic conflict.

¹² In this study, the language of ‘modern’ is often a circumlocution for ‘contemporary’. However, it is also clear (especially after Chapter Three) that ‘modern’ carries with it overtones of ‘modernity’ as well.

¹³ Rowan Williams, ‘Prologue,’ in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), xii.

¹⁴ The language is drawn from Michael Murrmann-Kahl, *"Mysterium trinitatis"?: Fallstudien zur Trinitätslehre in der evangelischen Dogmatik des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin-New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1997), 1-16.

traditions (their history, culture, language, religiosity, etc.). Every theology has ‘orthodoxies’, since theologies – no matter how radical, venerable or established – cannot erase this limitation. Without this factor, we would be unable to say anything with coherency or fidelity. On the one hand, this is an existential necessity since we cannot step out of our own skins, so to speak. But on the other this reality intimates a theological truth also: that our knowledge of God is always socially and historically mediated. As finite beings, our rationality is sequential and diachronic, and so (because of this) one could say that theological language is a *learned* discourse, and is entwined with those habits that cultivate it. Or to adopt Marxist phraseology, one could say that orthodoxies are ‘produced’,¹⁵ and gather their viability as they capacitate the traversal of ‘symbolic capital’ across diverse contexts and strata.¹⁶ But because these ‘texts’ and ‘contexts’ are continuously produced and appraised, they are neither value-neutral nor ‘natural’. They are living and vibrant systems fabricated through historical signs and material practices, semantic densities that are subject to time and alteration.¹⁷ Theological reflection occurs within this flux, and the often ‘unsystematized speech’ that is awakened within it.¹⁸ Once more, as theologians, we are placed within ‘the middle’. We are unable to erase those ‘life-worlds’ (*Lebenwelten*) and ‘backgrounds’ (*Umwelten*) that shape us – including the present author. As a Caucasian-African male, as a descendent of European colonizers and refugees, I am shaped by Western tendencies of thought. This can be discerned, for example, in my metaphysical and genealogical proclivities, my preference for ‘historicism’, as well as my choice of subject-matter, which is dominated by North Atlantic, Euro-American men. However, one should also stress that being placed in South Africa makes one sensitive to questions which might not be readily apparent in others. The almost daily admixture of joy and despair, of laughter within the vale of tears as experienced by the majority of black and brown South Africans, cannot be lost on any sensitive commentator.¹⁹ Tragedy, real or fictional, is not just a Western phenomenon.²⁰ In this light, my study is contextual, personal and ‘biographical’,²¹ in the sense that it exhibits what Williams has called the ‘lived incoherence’ of theological writing, a factor which reminds us of ‘the

¹⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 17-113.

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods,’ in *The Field of Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 74–111.

¹⁷ Graham Ward, *How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 131-135.

¹⁸ Cf. Williams, ‘Prologue,’ xii-xiii.

¹⁹ For a window into this, see the phenomenological analysis of township life in Abraham Olivier, ‘Heidegger in the township’. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 34.2 (2015): 240-254.

²⁰ Cf. Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson, *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²¹ In my case, an interest in the theme of ‘the tragic’ can be traced to my early postgraduate research as well as my Masters dissertation, which in many ways is a precursor to this current study.

inescapable place of repentance in all theological speech worth the name'.²² Alluding to this should not, however, act as an alibi for ersatz or hazy argumentation, but should rather remind us of the angularity of its composition.

Locatedness and particularity are intrinsic to know where one is speaking from. We cannot escape our 'middles'. But then how does one retain rigour or accountability? What approach should we take to maintain 'objectivity'? Here, I will adapt some concepts used by Vincent Brümmer²³ and others²⁴ to unravel my method and assumptions presupposed in this study. Firstly, as stated, my argument works within a trajectory of classical and orthodox metaphysics, and therefore aims to express *continuity* within this stream. I work within this 'tradition', one that traces its origins to those scriptural and patristic sources that provided the early seed-bed for Christian thought.²⁵ This specificity establishes the limits and objectivity of the work, insofar as it projects not just any object, but a particular one. But I am apprised that one cannot simply repeat formulae without an awareness of how such language works in the present, and the overtones this might or might not carry due to changed circumstances and historical resonance.²⁶ This suggests that translation and non-identical repetition remain essential for the process of handing-over, and that Christian 'identity' does not persist apart from this, and assists us with understanding the theological criterion of *relevance* – the ability to speak to one's time – or what McCurry has called *traditioned creativity*. To quote Rowan Williams once more, 'orthodoxy' (or tradition) remains 'something still future', which 'means that a briskly undialectical rhetoric' of 'conserving' or 'defending' 'a clear deposit of faith may come less easily to us', since 'Orthodoxy continues to be made'.²⁷ Therefore, we cannot make the assumption that holding strictly onto dogmas or scriptural language will guarantee faithfulness to the tradition. On the contrary, sometimes one requires a leap of imagination, a rupture within language, to maintain identity within the present. Moreover, I do not assume a homogenous tradition devoid of diverse streams and counter-arguments, as well as persecuted or minority voices. I presume a complex tradition, and affirm an existential requirement that different historical periods or contexts might require a shifting or pragmatic emphasis of one stream over another. This addresses the problem of practical *adequacy*, that the 'symbolic capital' of one or another stream might change or dissipate – depending on its historical

²² Williams, 'Prologue,' xvi.

²³ See Vincent Brümmer, 'The Intersubjectivity of Criteria in Theology,' in *Brümmer on Meaning and the Christian Faith: Collected Writings of Vincent Brümmer* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 453-470.

²⁴ Gerrit Brand, *Speaking of a Fabulous Ghost: In Search of Theological Criteria with Special Reference to the Debate on Salvation in African Christian Theology*. Contributions to Philosophical Theology Vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002), 38-57.

²⁵ Brümmer's reflections in 'The Identity of the Christian Tradition,' in *Brümmer on Meaning and the Christian Faith*, 375-389 for a philosophical account of 'tradition'.

²⁶ See Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 55-58 for more on this.

²⁷ Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 24-25.

location. As the past shows, repressed traditions may become ‘orthodoxy’ and mainline traditions ‘heretical’ insofar as they are able to, or fail to, open deeper ranges of meaning and *coherency*.²⁸ This point is important to stress: throughout this study in particular we will stress again and again the ideal of a ‘systematic’ coherence as regards the relation between classically-inclined Christian metaphysics and ‘the tragic’. Such coherency is applicable to the question of its internal theological consistency, but also has connection to other regimes of knowledge. Ideally, it should offer an aesthetic and persuasive power, a capacity to account for diverse experiences and language-games within a comprehensive vision.²⁹ In other words, it should exhibit *credibility*. If it fails to do so, or demonstrates a lack of coherency with available knowledge, its epistemic plausibility will suffer as a consequence. This does not necessarily mean that such a position is completely wrong or misguided, since novel hypotheses might propose a vision at odds with current sciences, and still be finally more correct (Galileo is an example of this).³⁰ Still, theological traditions should aspire to an elegance of explanation, and not incoherency. This applies not only to the principle of non-contradiction, but touches on broader theological themes as well.

For example, from its inception Christian orthodoxy has constituted an attempt to garner a ‘world,’ and an intelligible arrangement of how we are situated in it. For Christianity, this ‘world’ assumes unity and rationality, since God is one and not divided. For this reason, the narrative of redemption cannot be localized in an exclusionary way, because that would imply that God’s dealings with creation were not reflective of the divine nature. The possibility of a radically *different* path towards salvation would imply there was a *different* god, thus undermining Oneness. If God’s actions were fundamentally disparate, one could not confess the deity of the biblical traditions. Apart from this metaphysical unity, the acclamation of ‘truth’ would be rendered dubious, since now there would be no trans-historical ‘sense’ in which the world could be ‘read’. It is this drift towards sense-making, of having a unified sense of ‘world’, that gave inspired the early Christians to construct narratives about themselves, and the universe they inhabited.³¹

Coherency and *credibility* also touch upon another area, namely what Brümmer calls *intersubjectivity*. This aspect privileges accountability between discourses, and the necessity

²⁸ As Williams says, heresy is largely about ‘a major reduction in the range of available sources of meaning’ (‘What is Catholic Orthodoxy,’ 16).

²⁹ My theology of persuasion is influenced by David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), and John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

³⁰ See Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (3rd ed., London and New York: Verso, 1993).

³¹ Rowan Williams, ‘Origen: Between Orthodoxy and Heresy,’ in Walther Bienert and Uwe Kühneweg (eds.), *Origenia Septima: Origenes in den Auseinandersetzungen des 4. Jahrhunderts* (Louvain: Peeters, 1999), 3-14; Williams ‘Defining Heresy,’ in Alan Kreider (ed.), *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh-New York: T & T Clark, 2001), 313-335 but esp. 324-327. Also, cf. Williams, ‘The Unity of Christian Truth,’ in *On Christian Theology*, 16-28

of a continuing encounter, so they will not become isolated and insular in their scope. In other words, our argument will have to balance a desire for the ‘systematic’ while also maintaining a sense of ‘realism’, an awareness that it is not reducible to an internal ‘language game’.³² It must remain alert to its finite and perspectival nature, and the particular tradition it works within. Of course, such an argument desires to demonstrate the intellectual resilience of this tradition in particular, but it does not try to be exhaustive or all-encompassing. It represents *an* argument situated within a very specific debate, and in our case, on the relation between the grammars of ‘transcendence’ and ‘the tragic’. In this context, however, there remains the question of how one retains ‘realism’ or ‘objectivity’ – here assuming the theological requirement that our language gives us ‘access to something other than itself’.³³ Here *intersubjectivity* assists with the external criteria of ‘objectivity’ in terms of responsibility and accountability to other language-games. However, Christianity has its own internal resources of ‘objectivity’ that are unique to its ‘object’, namely God. Speech about God should demonstrate real transcendence. And yet how does religious speech show this? One suggests that theological speech moves in the right direction to the degree that it does what it *says* it does.³⁴ Its argumentation, its style and form, should bear witness to the peculiarity of its object. As Williams suggests, theology cannot claim a ‘total perspective’ because ‘there can be no conversation with a total perspective’.³⁵ Consequentially, language about God must express ‘dispossession’ – to use another phrase of Williams³⁶ – if it is to demonstrate its integrity, an integrity that ‘declines the attempt to take God’s point of view’.³⁷ For him, ‘the truth of a religious claim is a matter of discovering its resource and scope for holding together and making sense of our perceptions and transactions without illusion’.³⁸ This move relates itself to the criteria of unity and coherency. But it must therefore express accountability to its transcendent object, and should not remain stuck within a self-immunizing system. For Williams, theological language articulates ‘realism’ insofar as it is ‘done in ways that are open to continuing scrutiny and revision’. Thereby, it ‘shows that we are serious about the extra-mental by certain features of our linguistic behaviour, and ‘by the exposure of our representations to response and correction or expansion, by behaving as though they were accountable to something more than their own inner logic or the convenience of the

³² For a critique of an ‘intertextual’ theology, see Rowan Williams, ‘The Judgement of the World,’ in *On Christian Theology*, 29-43; Paul J. Dehart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

³³ Williams, ‘Religious Realism’: On Not Quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt,’ in *Wrestling with Angels*, 247. However, the entire chapter is instructive in this regard.

³⁴ For this argument, see Williams, ‘Theological Integrity,’ in *On Christian Theology*, 3-15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8-12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

speaker'.³⁹ It must evidence a transparency, a dispossession, a willingness 'to *display* modes of arguing and interpreting rather than to advance a single system'.⁴⁰ In this light, one may paraphrase Gadamer: when it comes to the question of theological argumentation, *the truth is in the method*. Or to put it differently, the question of *how* one argues is intrinsically related to *what* one argues.

So while this study hopes to bypass any gestures towards 'totalization',⁴¹ and is therefore resigned to the 'lived incoherence' of particularity, one should emphasize that it remains committed to larger questions of *meaning* that are essential for theological argumentation.⁴² It has a regard for those 'systematic' aporias that arise within the juxtaposition of thought-worlds, while holding onto a vision of 'integrity' or 'coherence' that is intrinsic to sense-making. Theology can never be parochial or ghettoized: the situatedness of all regimes of discourse does not necessitate reductionism. This is because any 'context' is always-already situated in a more comprehensive 'text' that prohibits closure,⁴³ since every cultural production is encoded within a scope that cannot be pre-emptively foreclosed. Therefore, any reference to an index apart from its setting of intelligibility risks mystification, since particulars are not comprehended without their placing. Instead, the imagining of a 'context' involves connecting 'life-worlds' to a whole, to an intuited 'totality' – or in the case of theology, to a sense of the divine. It is this intuition that remains essential for 'systematic theology', insofar as it brings all existence into the remit of the divine light. To quote Aquinas: 'in sacred science, *all things* [my italics] are treated of under the aspect of God: either because they are God Himself or because they refer to God as their beginning and end'.⁴⁴ If this is true, then reality has its *raison d'être* in divinity, since every existent is dependent on God and reflects God as cause. 'Systematic theology' is therefore inextricably connected to the logic of creation, insofar that it traces the multiplicity of existents to a divine plenitude.⁴⁵ It is this assumption that motivates the drive within 'systematic theology' towards

³⁹ Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 77.

⁴⁰ Williams, 'Prologue,' xvi.

⁴¹ My understanding of 'totalization' is drawn from the realm of critical theory, and to some extent coheres with the understanding of the term as found in Adorno and Levinas. For a brief and critical discussion of the idea of 'system' in relation to 'totalization', see Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 24-28.

⁴² See Vincent Brümmer, 'Spirituality and the Hermeneutics of Faith (2010)'. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66.1, 5 pages. On the history of the term 'sense', see Fabien Burgee, 'Common Sense'; Barbara Cassin, Sandra Laughier, Alain de Libera, Irene Rosier-Catch and Giaconda Spinosa, 'Sense / Meaning'; Alain De Libera, 'Sensus Communis,' in Barbara Cassin (ed.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 152–154; 949–967; 967–968 resp.

⁴³ This I take to be Derrida's central contribution.

⁴⁴ *Summa Theologiae* I.1.7. The translation is from <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/>.

⁴⁵ A. N. Williams, 'What is Systematic Theology?' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11.1 (2009): 40-55; John Webster, 'Principles of Systematic Theology'. *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11.1 (2009): 56-71.

imagining ‘the whole’ – a *théologie totale* (Sarah Coakley). And it is this which gives systematics its inter-disciplinary tendency, its desire to connect ‘sacred doctrine’ to diverse fields of study.⁴⁶

It is therefore an assumption of this study that the practice of systematic theology requires a ‘metaphysic’, that is, an attempt to think the multiple in its dependency on the One and, contrariwise, to show the One as reflected in the Many. In other words, it should account for this reality of divergence, while making conjectures regarding their interconnections within a prior unity. Admittedly, the language of ‘metaphysics’, and especially after Martin Heidegger, has received a significant amount of bad publicity. One only has to mention ‘ontotheology’⁴⁷ and there is a clamour to be distanced from it. According to Heidegger, it is by considering ‘Being’ as the *Grund* of ‘beings’ that we, on the one side, forget the question of Being itself, and, on the other, ultimately include God within a causality that denies real transcendence.⁴⁸ In the wake of this diagnosis, modern theology has castigated ‘metaphysics’ as promoting an abstract deity with precious resemblance to the living God of revealed theology (e.g. Karl Barth). Or to adopt an even stronger version, it has been argued that ‘metaphysics’ aims to construct an idolatrous God *within* finite ‘being’, and therefore that the God of metaphysics (or ontotheology) cannot be the ‘God’ of the Christian tradition (e.g. Jean-Luc Marion). These criticisms are not without merit, and this study is in solidarity with several of its concerns. Nonetheless, it must be said that the history of ‘metaphysics’ is rather variegated, and cannot be reduced to Heideggerian genealogy.⁴⁹ One must remain alert to the ruptures within

⁴⁶ See Graham Ward’s chapter in ‘What is an Engaged Systematics?’ in Ward, *How the Light Gets In*, 115–144. Also see Sarah Coakley’s reflections on systematics as a *théologie totale* in *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 33–65.

⁴⁷ As is well known, the term was invented by Kant, and thereafter taken up by Heidegger: ‘Transcendental theology either thinks that the existence of an original being is to be derived from an experience in general (without more closely determining anything about the world to which this experience belongs), and is called **cosmotheology**; or it believes that it can cognize that existence through mere concepts, without the aid of even the least experience, and is called **ontotheology**’ (Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A 632= B 660).

⁴⁸ Martin Heidegger, ‘The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics,’ in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Staumbach (New York, Evanston and London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969), 42–74.

⁴⁹ Olivier Boulnois, ‘Quand commence l’ontothéologie? Aristote, Thomas d’Aquin et Duns Scot’, *Revue Thomiste* 95 (1995): 85–108; Boulnois, *Être et représentation: Une généalogie de la métaphysique moderne à l’époque de Duns Scot (XIIIe -XIVe siècle)*. Épipiméthée (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999); Boulnois, *Métaphysique rebelles: genèse et structures d’une science au Moyen Âge*. Épipiméthée (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013); Jean-François Courtine, *Suarez et le système de la métaphysique*. Épipiméthée (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990); Alain de Libera, ‘Genèse et structure des métaphysiques médiévales,’ in Jean-Marc Narbonne and Luc Langlois (eds.), *La métaphysique: son histoire, ses enjeux* (Paris and Québec: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin / Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1999), 159–181; Constantino Esposito, ‘Heidegger, Suárez e la storia dell’ontologia’. *Quaestio: Journal of the History of Metaphysics* 1 (2001): 407–430; Esposito, ‘The Hidden Influence of Suárez on Kant’s Transcendental Conception of ‘Being’, ‘Essence’ and ‘Existence’,’ in Lukás Novák (ed.), *Suárez’s Metaphysics in its Historical and Systematic Context* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 117–134; Esposito, ‘Suárez and the Baroque Matrix of Modern Thought,’ in Victor Salas and Robert Fastiggi (eds.), *A Companion to Francisco Suárez*

medieval metaphysics and thereafter, and avoid overly-linear narratives of decline. ‘Metaphysics’ has multiple histories of ‘disruption’⁵⁰ that require re-narration. As regards my own metaphysical assumptions, however, I can safely say that they remain more-or-less classical and Thomistic in their temperament. For if Oliva Blanchette is correct, then a Thomistic metaphysics already states that it is only from *particular* beings that a meaning of ‘Being’ is extrapolated, since to the degree that any contingent entities *are*, they give an aperture into the *to be*. For Aquinas, the richness of being, of the *to be*, means that the multitude of beings ‘intensively’ reflects that infinite being in which all things live, move, and have their being.⁵¹ This already exceeds Heidegger’s history of metaphysics, and probably absolves Aquinas from charges of ontotheology.⁵²

Since we have now ‘recollected’ some of the characteristics of our theological method,⁵³ we may move onto a schematic of our argument.

1.3. The Argument

In terms of our chapter outline: as we will see, the majority of this study centers upon a critical exposition of Donald MacKinnon’s *The Problem of Metaphysics* (1974) and Rowan Williams’s *The Tragic Imagination* (2016). Why I have decided, methodologically, to focus on these texts will become clear as we go on. But simply stated, one can say that MacKinnon, even until the present day, remains a significant discussion partner within the theological conversation on the tragic. Therefore, it appears logical that our discussion focus on the book where his most mature presentation appears. Much of this same reasoning could be adduced for choosing *The Tragic Imagination*. To date, it constitutes Williams’s only monograph-

(Leiden: Brill, 2014), 124-147; Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Metaphysics: From Parmenides to Levinas*, trans. Lukas Soderstrom (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Honnefelder, ‘Der zweite Anfang der Metaphysik. Voraussetzungen, Ansätze und Folgen der Wiederbegründung der Metaphysik im 13./14. Jahrhundert,’ in J. P. Beckmann, L. Honnefelder, G. Schrimpf, G. Wieland (eds.), *Philosophie im Mittelalter. Entwicklungslinien und Paradigmen* (Meiner: Hamburg 1987), 165-186; Honnefelder, *Scientia transcendens. Die formale Bestimmung der Seiendheit und Realitat in der Metaphysik des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit (Duns Scotus – Suarez – Wolff – Kant – Peirce)*. «Paradeigmata 9» (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990); Lamanna, ‘Ontology between Goclenius and Suárez,’ in Lukás Novák (ed.), *Suárez’s Metaphysics in its Historical and Systematic Context* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 135-152.

⁵⁰ For this language, see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan-Smith (London: Routledge, 1989), 1-33.

⁵¹ Oliva Blanchette, *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics* (Washington D. C., The Catholic University of America, 2003), 83-144; Rudi Te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The ‘Divine Science’ of the Summa Theologiae* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 65-93.

⁵² For an argument showing that Aquinas should not be classed under ‘ontotheology’, see Jean-Luc Marion, ‘Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy,’ in *The Essential Writings* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 288-311.

⁵³ See Brümmer, ‘Philosophical Theology as Conceptual Recollection,’ in *Brümmer on Meaning and the Christian Faith*, 433-452.

length consideration of this question – which is why it has received a prominent place in this study.

Chapter 2 investigates where the tensions between orthodox Christianity and the tragic *might* have arisen. Here we argue that a retrojection of conflict onto abstract terms such as ‘Christianity’ and ‘the tragic’ fails to address those peculiar strategies employed by early and medieval Christians. Our exposition is however premised upon a prior story, namely the placement of Attic tragedy within the debate between the poets and the philosophers (e.g. Plato). Thereafter, we discuss how ‘tragedy’ was transmuted into the Christian period, here suggesting that any hard rejection of ‘tragedy’ as such is rare, and that when ‘tragedy’ is criticized it is due to an alignment with anti-theatrical sentiments which were not exclusively Christian. On the contrary, the patristic and medieval periods display a variety of responses to tragic themes, many of which are positive and creative. Thus it appears that the tensions between ‘Christianity’ and ‘the tragic’ only become marked in the *modern* theological scene, which suggests that there are other more recent developments at hand which have produced them. This is exemplified within the proposals of some literary critics (e.g. George Steiner), and in the contemporary reception of Donald MacKinnon (e.g. David Bentley Hart and John Milbank).

In Chapter 3, we attempt to display where these moments of tension lie. It is suggested that a central problematic is the configuration of transcendence, particularly as regards to divine aseity. Thereafter, it suggests that the *modern* fabrication of a tension between Christianity and the tragic is manifest within three tendencies, all related to the nature of ‘transcendence’. Most pointedly, it is connected to *the invention of the tragic* within European classicism and philosophy. Of these tendencies, it is particularly (1) *the concept of the Kantian sublime* (e.g. Schiller) and (2) *a metaphysic of the suffering Absolute* (e.g. Schelling and Hölderlin) that provides a lucid connection between ‘the tragic’ and transcendence, and moreover how such trends create problems for aseity. These in turn are related to another trend which argues that an acceptance of the tragic implies (3) *a rejection of the Platonic-Augustinian notion of evil-as-privation* (e.g. Kathleen Sands), and with it any ontological priority of goodness. It is then suggested that a more classical metaphysics will have to address these developments.

Chapter 4 expositis the contemporary theological debate on the tragic, especially as this has occurred in the critical reception of Donald MacKinnon in David Bentley Hart and John Milbank. Hart’s criticisms of MacKinnon are not exclusively addressed to MacKinnon but to tragic drama as such, which he reads as proposing a ‘sacrificial totality’. But as regards MacKinnon himself, Hart argues that reading the gospel tragically ends-up misrepresenting the radicalness of Christ’s resurrection, and intimates a vision that tacitly advances the ontologization of violence. Milbank’s critique is related but more expansive: he would agree with Hart on the question of ontological pessimism and violence, since MacKinnon

categorically rejects the *privatio boni*. However, he also brings an emphasis on MacKinnon's Kantianism in a way that implicates him in a politics of liberalism and a post-Schillerian aesthetics of the sublime. It is this latter tendency, so Milbank claims, that is connected to MacKinnon's rejection of a Catholic doctrine of analogy, a move which in turn hinders MacKinnon from relating the historical to the metaphysical.

Chapter 5-6 aims to address these critiques to see whether they hit their mark. To do this, we engage in an extensive reading of Donald MacKinnon's *The Problem of Metaphysics*. We begin by analyzing MacKinnon's encounter with Aristotle and Kant's metaphysics before moving onto his reading of Plato and Kantian ethics, thereafter turning to his reflections on 'the tragic'. Our conclusions are mixed: overall, we confirm Milbank's critique of MacKinnon, but express disagreement as regards 'the tragic'. In the end nonetheless, we suggest that MacKinnon is finally unable to coherently relate the immanent to the transcendent, that is, in a way that is able to affirm the ultimate goodness of Being. Therefore, we think he remains entrenched, unwittingly, in a modern regime of the sublime. This is due to his Kantianism and his rejection of the *analogia entis*, as well as the concept of evil-as-privation.

Our next two chapters (7-8) will gravitate towards the contributions of Rowan Williams, who in our estimate provides the most admirable synthesis of the tensions we have been addressing. On the one hand, he expounds an analogical metaphysics that includes historicity, as seen in his reflections on poetics, language and analogy. Moreover, unlike MacKinnon, Williams is completely committed to the *privatio boni* and divine non-passibility, a move which assists him in avoiding the critiques of Hart and MacKinnon. On the other hand, he provides a riposte to Milbank and Hart as regards 'tragedy', thereby showing how the story might be more complicated than Milbank and Hart's conclusions appear to imply.

In our final chapter, there is a summary of our argument. In terms of our most pertinent question (namely '*can a classical account of transcendence affirm the tragic?*'), our argument suggests that Williams provides a correction and supplementation to MacKinnon's approach. Firstly, he avoids Hart and Milbank's critiques of divine suffering – as well as their accusations of ontological violence and pessimism – as being incompatible with an orthodox perspective. Secondly, his affirmation of the *privatio boni* refuses an absolutization of evil, which MacKinnon's position was unable to sufficiently counter-act. Moreover, his acceptance of a modified Augustinianism at this point denies any order or meaning to evil and suffering per se. Such enables Williams to do at least two things: (1) it refuses any theodicy which grants meaning to *all* suffering, as if evil could be 'justified' as an alignment with the best of possible worlds. On the contrary, evil and suffering *as such* have no necessary ordering towards the truth, and therefore should not be assumed as having meaningfulness. However, (2) such a perspective does not exclude the ability of human beings to *create* meaning out of

suffering and tragedy, specifically in the way that trauma becomes representable between relational agents. Additionally, Williams's clear denial of an eschatological cancellation of tragedy, and his suggestion that the risen body includes its wounds, is able to maintain (in a different fashion) what MacKinnon dubbed 'the transcendence of the tragic' or what Paul Janz calls 'the finality of non-resolution'. Because of this, one could say then that Williams affirms the *negativity of the tragic*, while including an amelioration of its finality. Thirdly, Williams's conceptual superiority over MacKinnon becomes clearer as regards the contemporary 'sublime'. As will be argued, MacKinnon's metaphysics was ultimately unclear in his postulation of the convertibility of goodness with being, and that this was linked to his rejection of the *privatio boni*. However, because Williams clearly endorses the evil-as-privation doctrine, and cogently defends Augustine's position against its critiques, it appears that Williams does not fall into the tradition of sublimity that conceptually ails MacKinnon. It is at this juncture where our study tries to make a unique contribution: it seeks to relate Williams's analyses, specifically within *The Tragic Imagination*, to his larger metaphysical enterprise, and to questions that were not addressed in the constraints of that work. Moreover, it draws out his implicit critique of Kantian sublimity and its postmodern iterations, as this is found in its assertions of the unthinkability and unspeakability of pain – implications which he did not substantially tease-out in *The Tragic Imagination*. However, and despite all of the benefits of Williams's position, his conclusions have not been un-criticized, and so towards the end of his chapter, we detail some of the critiques and some of the questions which might be left open as we bring the study to a conclusion.

As we make our transition to the next chapter, here is a revision of what we have discussed: at the beginning, we outlined our research topic as this was related to the supposed tensions between a classical account of 'transcendence' and 'the tragic'. There we hinted how this debate is incarnated within the contemporary discussion between Hart, Milbank, MacKinnon and Williams. We then suggested a structure for the development of this argument, specifically as it proceeds through a critical reception of MacKinnon's work, and its supplementation by Williams. Thereafter, I disclosed my assumptions as regards method, here drawing upon Vincent Brümmer and Rowan Williams. Moreover, I suggested (after Williams) that transparency and dispossession should become intrinsic to theological argumentation. We also stated how the method of 'systematics' requires a 'metaphysics', specifically as this seeks to relate the particularity of contexts to a wider scope of intellectual integrity and coherency.

In the following chapter, we address our understanding of tragic drama, with a particular focus on how tragic themes were appropriated by Plato and patristic-medieval thinkers. This is done with the aim of discerning where the supposed tensions between Christianity and the tragic are focused. In it, we suggest that things might be more complicated than the common

narrative might suggest, and that the opposition between Christian theology and tragedy might be a confabulation of modern critics and theologians. This is important for our task insofar as it relates to our attempt to investigate where the tensions between ‘Christianity’ and ‘the tragic’ are to be located, and whether they remain valid within the current discussion. Our sense from reading the literature is that the enduring suspicions of ‘tragedy’ within Christianity are related to an unstable Platonic evaluation of theatre in general. Moreover, these voices are not magisterial but rather minor when compared to the deluge of positive or neutral receptions among pre-modern Christian writers. The history suggests, therefore, that there is by-no-means a necessary contradiction between Christian language and tropologies of the tragic. However, it does raise the question where these tensions have arisen in the past. In this regard, we suggest that it is among modern critics that there have been developments that have tended to reify and essentialise ‘Christianity’ and ‘the tragic’ into mutually-exclusive visions, a move not required by the availing evidence. This insight, in the light of our general argument, will assist us exploring the relationship between the classical tradition of orthodoxy and ‘tragedy’ in the broadest sense of that term, and our question regarding their conceptual reconciliation.

Chapter 2

On a Perennial Debate

This chapter will attempt to lay-out a definition of ‘tragedy’ and the ‘the tragic’, with the assistance of classicists such as Jean-Pierre Vernant. In doing so, it seeks to problematize the opposition between the performative and the reflective as regards tragic drama. It suggests that ‘tragedy’ at its origins was engaged in contemplation (*theoria*), and was always-already amenable to philosophical readings. Thereafter, our deconstruction is strengthened through an analysis of Plato, with the purpose of showing that his contribution is unstable, a fact which renders his vituperations against the tragic (and theatre more generally) as liable to immanent critique. Here we draw upon the scholarship of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Stephen Halliwell. After that, we examine the reception of tragedy within patristic and medieval thinkers, there showing that there is by-no-means a single strategy of response in this regard. ‘Tragedy’ and ‘the tragic’ were deployed in multiple ways by diverse thinkers, and was not received in a negative light by the majority. This then raises the question as to where the perceived tensions between Christianity and the tragic arise. Here already there is a sense that the opposition might be a relatively recent creation, and could have a lot to do with the *modern* invention of ‘the tragic’, as well as reductive readings of Christianity tradition *and* the tragic. This idea is developed more in Chapter 3, but already there are some intimations of this development.

2.1. On ‘Tragedy’ and ‘the Tragic’

The following study is in many ways devoid of novelty. It would not be out of place to situate its content within that ancient debate stemming from Plato, which considered poetry to be incompatible with truthful discourse. This point alone suggests that ‘tragedy’ remains controversial, both in regard to its dramatic provocation, as well as its endless receptions and ramifications. ‘Tragedy’ has a history and is an ‘effective history’. In fact, one could even suggest that ‘tragedy’ has in diverse ways stimulated the turn to ‘history’ in both ancient and modern times. Already then, Attic drama connected the typologies of mythic folklore to politico-juridical debates within the ancient city, being traceable to the ‘invention’⁵⁴ of theatre in fourth century Athens (around 534 BCE).⁵⁵ As is now well-known, the aetiology of tragedy

⁵⁴ In the words of Jean-Pierre Vernant, even though tragedy was thoroughly informed by its context and historical ‘moment’ within Athens, it should still be considered as an ‘invention’ not fully reducible to its immediate background. For this, see Vernant, ‘The Historical Moment of Tragedy in Greece: Some Social and Historical Conditions,’ in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York, Zone Books, 1988), 23-28.

⁵⁵ Gerald F. Else, *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy*. Martin Classical Lectures, vol. 20 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1965).

has been sourced within the City Dionysia, and was linked to Dionysos and the sacrificial cult in ancient Greece, even though the exact nature of this causality remains murky.⁵⁶ We cannot avoid the religious element within the genesis of tragedy, and will return to it again. But it must be emphasized here that ‘tragedy’ also served as a paradigm of political engagement, one which sought to expose the fragility of the Athenic city-state, as it was formed during an important period of cultural transition. This was revealed within those liminalities between ‘legal’ traditions that emphasized personal responsibility under law, and those ‘archaic’ and ‘heroic’ traditions (stemming from Homeric theology) that sought to assert the often-inscrutable justice of the gods, and (in particular) the excessiveness of Dionysos.⁵⁷ Here the mythological foundations of the πόλις were no longer immune from investigation and critique, but were migrated into the terrain of political scrutiny. Within this movement, it was particularly ‘the hero’ who was subject to interrogation: in tragedy, she or he ceases to be a *model* to be simplistically emulated, but a *problem* to be represented (Vernant). This ‘politicizing’ trend can also be seen in the way that tragic art ascribed a greater importance to human agency than earlier mythical presentations which did not disclose this sensitivity.⁵⁸ Such emphasis on human volition (not to be understood in the post-Enlightenment sense of an individual will, but as a contributing factor within the matrix of divine-human causalities⁵⁹) has a connection to the democratic impulse that informed early drama – a factor obfuscated since Aristotle’s *Poetics*.⁶⁰ The political function of tragedy within this context was to tease out the dangers within the ‘civic ideology’ of the Athenic state,⁶¹ even though it cannot be

⁵⁶ Walter Burkert, ‘Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual [1966],’ in Wolfgang Rösler (ed.), *Kleine Schriften VII: Tragica et Historica* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 1-36. On the general religious ethos that informs Attic tragedy, see Stephen Halliwell, ‘Human Limits and the Religion of Greek Tragedy’, *Literature & Theology* 4.2 (1990): 169-180.

⁵⁷ Vernant, ‘Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy’ in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 29-48. Here one could mention the point raised by Paul Veyne regarding the importance of heroic legends, and how belief in such legends was less subject to the acids of cynicism than even the Olympian deities. This means that the subjection within tragic drama of ancient heroes to moral ambiguity should not be taken lightly, in light of the importance attached to them. See Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, trans. Paula Wishing (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁵⁸ For more on the conception of human volition within Greek tragedy, see Jean-Pierre Vernant, ‘Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy,’ in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 49-84.

⁵⁹ Cf. Albin Lesky, ‘Decision and Responsibility in the Tragedy of Aeschylus’, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 86 (1966): 78-85.

⁶⁰ Wolfgang Rösler, *Polis und Tragödie: Funktionsgeschichtliche Betrachtungen zu einer Antiken Literaturgattung* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz GmbH, 1980); Edith Hall, ‘Is There a Polis in Aristotle’s *Poetics*?’ in M. S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 294-309; Page DuBois, ‘Toppling the Hero: Polyphony in the Tragic City’, *New Literary History* 35.1 (2004): 63-81.

⁶¹ On the function of tragedy in regard to the ‘civic ideology’ of Athens, see Simon Goldhill, ‘The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology’, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107 (1987): 58-76.

separated from the ideological drive to establish consensus within its ranks also.⁶² Nevertheless, by representing this *agon*, tragedy contributed to the democratic project within ancient Greece, as can be seen, for example, in its emphasis on the presentation of conflict and the balancing of interests within the *demos* of the city (e.g. *The Oresteia*).⁶³ This is evidenced by all of the great tragedians associated with the golden age of its development, including Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.⁶⁴

The historicist aetiology of Greek tragedy assists to hold in check an overly-generalized recounting of Attic drama,⁶⁵ tendencies which (amongst others) stem from the *long durée* of de-politicized readings of tragedy, as well as Kantian traditions of subjective aesthetics.⁶⁶ Such contingencies were combined with the priority of private reading during eras of intense speculation regarding the tragic form, since tragedies were not widely performed in Europe until rather late in its history.⁶⁷ This lesson needs to be absorbed, because there has been a tendency to underplay the context that eventuated in the tragic form. Nonetheless, we should not acquiesce to those who militate against its universalizing thrust. One sees from early on that ‘tragedy’ already invited reflection and abstraction. Within the substance of the drama itself, the tragic Chorus – who are by-no-means simply bystanders in the action – provide contemplative diatribes on the action being witnessed, often drawing conclusions that are not peculiar to the characters in question, but relate to human experience universally or collectively,⁶⁸ as seen in the ‘Ode to Man’ (*Antigone* 332-375) and the Chorus’s assertion that Oedipus is an instructive paradigm of human unhappiness generally (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 1524-1530).⁶⁹ Additionally, the content of ‘tragedy’ was already generalized within antiquity (as in

⁶² Oddone Longo, ‘The Theater and the Polis,’ in J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin (eds.), *Nothing to do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 12-19.

⁶³ See Aeschylus. *The Oresteian Trilogy: Agamemnon, The Choephoroi, The Eumenides*, trans. Philip Vellacott (Great Britain: Penguin, 1956).

⁶⁴ J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 67-163.

⁶⁵ For examples, scholars such as Michelle Gellrich have pointedly shown how ‘tragedy’ often escapes the confines of ‘tragic theory’. For this, see *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁶⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (2nd rev. ed., London and New York: Continuum, 1989), 37-49.

⁶⁷ Simon Goldhill, ‘Generalizing About Tragedy,’ in Rita Felski (ed.), *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 45-65.

⁶⁸ See John Gould, ‘Tragedy and Collective Experience’ and the response by Simon Goldhill, ‘Collectivity and Otherness – The Authority of the Tragic Chorus: Response to Gould,’ in M. S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic*, 217-243 and 244-256 resp.

⁶⁹ I have drawn my references from Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonos*, trans. Robert Fagles (Great Britain: Penguin, 1984). For the ‘Ode to Man’, see Charles Segal, ‘Sophocles’ Praise of Man and the Conflicts of the “Antigone”’. *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 3.2 (1964): 46-66. On the Chorus’s reflection in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Kamerbeek writes that ‘Oedipus’ fate is represented as paradigmatic of the human condition, but in such a way that the misery of the man Oedipus is not lost sight of, nor his greatness,’ in J. M. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles, Part IV: The Oedipus Tyrannus* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 222.

Aristophanes's *Frogs* and Aristotle's *Poetics*), and by time of the Roman historian Cassius Dio (c. 150–235 AD) one could already be apply 'tragedy' to historical events, such as Nero's murder of his mother.⁷⁰ What this says is that 'tragedy' and 'the tragic' already had developed a degree of formalized content by this time, and that this trend – while certainly exacerbated in the modern period – is not completely unique or unprecedented. One could add to this Charles Segal's comments: he says that Oedipus (or tragedy) has 'always be torn between the historicists and the universalizers', and that both sides need 'to rescue the work from the other'.⁷¹ Similarly, the Cambridge-based classicist Simon Goldhill has spoken of 'a double attentiveness' within our reflection on tragedy, one that needs to 'pay due attention to the specific socio-political context of ancient drama, while recognizing the drive towards transhistorical truth in the plays'[s] discourse and in the plays'[s] reception'. This means that 'tragedies and "the tragic" are in a productive and dialectical tension', and continually need to be placed alongside one another in order for this relation to be beneficial.⁷² He goes on to say that because 'drama itself is committed to dialogue, to a play or contest of different voices', this means that 'the tension between locatedness and generality is integral to Greek tragedy'.⁷³ This is why there is a need to maintain a balance between treating ancient or modern tragedies as 'texts', and our ever-changing cultural deployments of them as 'scripts'.⁷⁴ 'Scripts' are linked to 'performances', and are tied to our 'culturally produced horizons of expectation'. While evidencing a 'historical contingency', a script 'exceeds the process of its performance', and does not ever achieve 'the status of an ordinary or fixed object'.⁷⁵

One can conclude then that tragedy exhibits a simultaneous tendency towards the particular and the universal, towards the abstractive and the concrete – which is a philosophical gesture. From a hermeneutical perspective, Gadamer has argued that the temporality of an aesthetic consciousness implies a non-identical repetition of an artwork's presence in the here and now. The work becomes 'contemporaneous' with our own time, and includes us within it.⁷⁶ The same can be said for 'the tragic', since it contains 'no unchanging essence' to which we are

⁷⁰ I draw this example from Adrian Poole, *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14.

⁷¹ Charles Segal, *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 142.

⁷² Goldhill, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy*, 165.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 262-263.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁷⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 119-125. Gadamer is attempting here to overcome the emphasis on 'alienation' and 'subjectivity' that have characterized aesthetics since the time of Kant and Schiller. See pp. 37-101 for his deeply perceptive reading of this trajectory. For what follows, also see Daniel L. Tate, 'Transcending the Aesthetic: Gadamer on Tragedy and the Tragic,' in Oleg V. Bychkov and James Fodor (eds.), *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 34-50.

objectively referred, but is made present in multiple forms and to which response is invited.⁷⁷ Gadamer says that tragedy is self-involving in this sense because its very definition is included in the ‘*effect...on the spectator*’. But this immersive experience is not merely individualized or subjective, but includes a transformative ecstasy whereby the spectator is temporarily taken outside of themselves through an experience of ‘commiseration’ and ‘apprehension’ (to adapt Aristotle’s terms). This provides release and reconciliation with the truth of reality,⁷⁸ namely, a discovery of that ‘tragic suffering’ that is ‘truly common’ to the human lot.⁷⁹ Thus there is a dynamic interplay in the ‘tragic pensiveness’⁸⁰ of ancient drama, between the *theatrical* moment of ritual immersion (*theoros*) and the *theoretical* moment of reflective contemplation (*theoria*).⁸¹ Once more, we can see how the opposition between tragedy and philosophy is subjectable to deconstruction.

However as this dynamic is translated beyond the sphere of theatre as such, one could say (with Larry Bouchard) that there must be a focus on the particularity that ‘tragedies’ assume – whether they are real or fictional – in order to make responsible generalizations. In applying this observation, our definition of ‘tragedy’ or ‘the tragic’ will have an open-texture that makes allowances different and changing concepts of ‘the tragic as an existential or religious dimension’.⁸² As a result, this hermeneutical circle will, in turn, feed back into our definition of tragedy *qua* tragedy, or even expand the meaning of ‘the tragic’.⁸³ This means that there will be interplay between the different manifestations of the tragic, between ‘the literary, the philosophical, and the vernacular’ (here adopting Felski’s terms⁸⁴). According to Felski, the ‘literary’ aspect refers to the textual-aesthetic productions of tragic themes (e.g. Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, Racine, etc.), while ‘the philosophical’ refers to abstract reflections on ‘the tragic’ (e.g. Plato, Aristotle, Schiller, Hegel, Nietzsche, etc.). Finally, ‘the vernacular’ speaks to that everyday sense of the term, as when we refer to this or that event as being ‘tragic’. Such a judgement will also have to be context specific, since not all suffering

⁷⁷ *Truth and Method*, 125.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁸² Larry D. Bouchard, *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology: Evil in Cotemporary Drama and Religious Thought* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 244.

⁸³ Bouchard wonders whether events like Hiroshima and the Shoah can really be classified as tragedies rather than just ‘events, brutal facts, of such enormity as commonly to provoke the sense that they are different from ordinary events, beyond the grasp of reason’ but then backtracks a little by saying that maybe these events change the way we perceive what ‘tragedy’ or ‘the tragic’ even means, and writes that ‘there has never been much warrant for demanding that tragedies comport to sacrosanct formulas’ (*Ibid.*, 249).

⁸⁴ Rita Felski, ‘Introduction,’ in Rita Felski (ed.), *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 1-25 (pp. 2-4).

or death should be deemed ‘tragic’.⁸⁵ One could say that ‘the tragic’ expresses a sort of ‘relativity’, since what might destroy one person might not have the same effect on another.⁸⁶ Ultimately, the particular circumstances that actualize events should be taken into account. This will assist us in making distinctions between different kinds of pain. Without such distinctions, ‘tragedy’ as a term would be too diffuse, lacking heuristic capacity.

By way of summation, I suggest that this back-and-forth movement between tragedy as *discourse* and tragedy as *empirical history* appears advantageous for a capacious account of tragic experience,⁸⁷ and moreover seems to be internal to the conceptualization of ‘the tragic’ itself.

2.2. On Poets and Philosophers

But if this movement towards the contemplative is already present within tragic drama, then what is one to say about the debate between the poets and philosophers, or, more specifically for our purposes, the debate between theology and tragedy? The debate has come to be exemplified in concrete terms by Plato’s expulsion of the poets from the ideal city. But as we will see things are not quite so simple as far as Plato is concerned.

At the outset one can say, against commonplace reductions of his thinking, that Plato’s objections to the poets are only partially based upon the critique of Homeric theology. If this was the main concern of his invective, Plato would be hardly different from Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Pythagoras or even the tragic poets, who all in one way or another expressed distaste for an anthropomorphic religion. Plato assumed this as a matter of course, but this is not where the weight of his emphasis lies: his deeper problem with poetry is both more subtle and more radical. His critique can be summarized as follows: while philosophy is concerned with truth, poetry is an imitation (*mimesis*) of what it sees. Poetry is about ‘appearances’ (*doxa*), with the ‘look’ of things rather than the discovery of things-in-themselves. It is variety of Sophism because it does not attempt to reflect upon the meaning of ‘the just’ or ‘the good’, but is content with the ‘opinions’ (*doxa*) of the *hoi polloi*. Much like the Sophists, it makes the weaker argument appear stronger through aesthetic embellishment. It does not question the perceived world, but imitates, repeats, and represents it. As a consequence, it promotes the degradation of society and the self, because in simply being concerned with salubrious or

⁸⁵ See Reinhold Bernhardt ‘Die Erfahrung des Tragischen als Herausforderung für Theologie. Versuch zur Theodizee’. *Theologische Zeitschrift* 59 (2003): 248-270 (pp. 258-259).

⁸⁶ Dalferth has spoken of ‘the relativity of evil’ in the sense that evil is always the perversion of something (*von etwas*) for a particular individuals (*für jemanden*). For more detail on this argument, see Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Malum: Theologische Hermeneutik des Bösen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 86-88.

⁸⁷ I take this distinction from Paul D. Janz and his discussion of Donald MacKinnon in *God, the Mind’s Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 171-173.

mellifluent presentation, one becomes alienated from truthful awareness. The mimetic impulse then, for Plato, does not concern itself with self-introspection, or the moral formation of citizens, but rather surrenders us to the complacency of the present order. Its aesthetic is finally an anaesthetic, a dulling of moral sensibility. Through imitation, one is distanced from ethical personhood, because one aims to imitate ‘the other’ rather than engage in self-knowledge (*gnōthi seauton*). But since any representation of ‘the other’ remains at the level of surfaces, the enterprise is rendered doubly superficial, since one is *not* concerned with the thing-in-itself, that is with ‘truth’, because ‘truth’ becomes simply a matter of persuasion and aesthetic adornment. ‘Truth’ is reduced to mere ‘opinion’. It follows then that even if poets give assurance of their afflatus, they are still not concerned with the discovery of truth. They remain unable to put forward a reliable procedure whereby truth might be sought. They mystify rather than clarify their particular *gnosis*. And even if they chance upon wisdom, this would be through happenstance rather than through a maieutic process. Since it could not be *followed* or *taught*, it would therefore be unreliable as a *paideia*. For Plato, ‘poetics’ – in the broadest sense of any aesthetic representation – ultimately encourages laziness of thinking, and promulgates enthusiasm at the expense of critical efficacy.⁸⁸ In conclusion, poetry sits lightly on the question of truth, because *mimesis*, as Plato says, remains ‘far removed from the truth’ (*The Republic* 598b).⁸⁹

But one has to ask: what about Plato’s conception of ‘tragedy’ specifically?⁹⁰ On this there are some scattered references throughout Plato’s texts: *Philebus* 50b refers to the tragic and comedic aspects of life, as they imply a living fluctuation between pain and pleasure, while *Cratylus* 408b-d implies that the tragic is associated with the ‘human’ side of the god Pan, and therefore with falsehood. The implication of this is that tragedy fails to give us veridical access to the divinity in its purity, since it locks us into a limited perspective of the material world. Then there is a well-known passage in *Laws* 817b that describes the encounter between the city’s lawmakers and a group of tragic actors, in which the guardians describe their ideal as superseding tragic theatre, since they have fashioned the city-state in accordance with ‘the finest and noblest life’, that is, a ‘tragedy’ which is the ‘best we can create’. Another reference can be found in *Phaedo* 115a in which Socrates adopts the position of a tragic character who is destined with a certain kind of death (in this case, suicide by hemlock). But Plato’s most stringent treatments of tragedy are to be found in *The Republic*, especially in Books II, III, and X. There he makes many of the arguments we have mentioned above; but in

⁸⁸ This reading relies upon the excellent essay of Hans-Georg Gadamer, entitled ‘Plato and the Poets,’ in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 39-72.

⁸⁹ Quotations are taken from Plato, *Complete Works*, (ed.) John Cooper (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

⁹⁰ This paragraph relies on Stephen Halliwell, ‘Plato’s Repudiation of the Tragic,’ in M. S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic*, 332-349.

addition to the critique of *mimesis*, one can mention the following, namely: tragedy's negative portrayal of the gods as the causes of evil (379a-c), its teaching that death is to be feared (386a-387c), that the death of loved ones is a loss of paramount scope (387d-388d), and its intimation that the just and happy life are not necessarily correlated (392b). The most pertinent critique however, as mentioned already, is the tendency for the poets to collapse reality into a form of representation. This impacts on the ethos of the city-state, since those who imbibe tragic emotions will equate such *pathos* with truthfulness. Emotions become disconnected from rational discernment, because the audience is immured in the lamentation that is connected to the experience of death (cf. 605a-d, 606a-b); but this immersion in pity and despair shows that we take death too seriously, and human life also. For Plato, however, 'human affairs aren't worth taking very seriously' in themselves (604b-c). Ultimately, the real danger of tragedy for Plato, in the words of Stephen Halliwell, is that 'emotional responses to tragedy are the carriers of implicit values and thus hold the potential to generate, or intensify, a tragic sense of life',⁹¹ values which are, in the estimation of Plato, unprofitable for our knowledge of the good life. Imitations that are seen and practiced from youth will become a part of one's nature (395c-d), and Plato worries that tragic theatre does not put forward images worth imitating. For him, tragedy corrupts those who are nurtured on its vision, and therefore it should be excluded from the ideal city he seeks to construct.

It is worth mentioning in passing that such a view is opposed to Aristotle's appreciation of *mimesis*, and tragedy in particular. As he famously said, tragedy is an 'imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself', which in its enactment involves 'incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions' (*Poetics* 1449b22-31).⁹² Aristotle was also more nuanced than Plato as regards suffering and happiness, since he allowed that 'the intermediate kind of personage' – a person having good and bad traits – could through their hidden 'fault'⁹³ endure a tragic 'discovery' and 'reversal' of fortunes (1452b31-38; 1452b10-13; 1452a22-b9). For Aristotle, it appears that imitation had an instructive and phronetic role for the listeners and readers – even if not presented as a spectacle (1453b1-11). For Aristotle, tragedy provides us with a universality that transcends the actors, since it is able to show us (in a delimited arrangement) the

⁹¹ Ibid., 345.

⁹² The translations are taken from Jonathan Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984). For a more in-depth philological treatment, see William Marx, 'La véritable catharsis aristotélicienne: Pour une lecture philologique et physiologique de la Poétique'. *Poétique* 166 (2011-2012): 131-154, who tries to show that the original function of the *pathēmatōn katharsin* in Aristotle was concerned with the balancing of pity and fear within the context of the ancient theory of humours. However, also compare this with the excellent essay of Jonathan Lear, who contests this kind of reading. See Jonathan Lear, 'Katharsis'. *Phronesis* 33.3 (1988): 297-326.

⁹³ For more on *hamartia* and *atē* in Aristotle and elsewhere, as well as the intimate connection between them, see R. D. Dawe, 'Some Reflections on *Ate* and *Hamartia*'. *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 72 (1968): 89-123.

connections between actions and their outcomes; it thereby acts as a pedagogical measure for the young who lack the practical experience that comes with age.⁹⁴ Thus as regards the moral worth of tragic poetry, Aristotle and Plato, it would seem could not appear more different.

But this is not the whole story: as already seen above, in Book VII of the *Laws*, Plato considers the ideal city-state as the best kind of ‘tragedy’. This implies that Plato potentially works with a looser definition of tragedy that allows for a more positive appreciation of its content. It is especially noticeable in Plato’s modes of argument, which can only be tenuously distinguished from theatrical presentations.⁹⁵ Additionally pertinent is his reference, throughout his writings, to various myths and imagery which are essential to his dialogues. To be sure, this imagery is bracketed by the claim that the philosopher may return to images only after she has grasped the truth that they represent.⁹⁶ But their usage should nonetheless give us pause when it comes to evaluating his ultimate position vis-à-vis the tragic and poetry more generally. In addition to this, there also have been several intelligent attempts to read Plato as a tragic philosopher: whether this applies to his account of reason, and its inability to convince those opposed to it,⁹⁷ or his understanding of *eros* as a never-to-be-accomplished search for unity.⁹⁸ One could also mention his account of the philosopher-king who must rule in the ideal city, but who is nonetheless condemned to play the dirty and mendacious games of politics in order to rule in the present.⁹⁹ And there is the question of whether tragedy as such, with its agonies of moral deliberation, does not already anticipate the dramatic aporias that Plato was deeply concerned with – a fact which intimates that Greek tragedy might have opened the way for Socratic philosophy.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the suggestion could be made that this ambiguity, both in regard to the content and structure of Plato’s philosophy, is echoed in the history of its countervailing receptions.

⁹⁴ Pierluigi Donini, ‘*Mimesis* tragique et apprentissage de la *phronesis*,’ in Mauro Bonazzi (ed.), *Commentary and Tradition: Aristotelianism, Platonism, and Post-Hellenistic Philosophy* (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 2011), 38-51.

⁹⁵ Dorothy Tarrant, ‘Plato as Dramatist’. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 75 (1955): 82-89.

⁹⁶ David C. Schindler, *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in The Republic*. (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 283-336.

⁹⁷ David Roochnik, *The Tragedy of Reason: Towards a Platonic Conception of Logos* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

⁹⁸ Drew A. Hyland, ‘Philosophy and Tragedy in the Platonic Dialogues,’ in N. Georgopoulos (ed.), *Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1993), 123-138.

⁹⁹ John D. Harman, ‘The Unhappy Philosopher: Plato’s “Republic” as Tragedy’. *Polity* 18.4 (1986): 577-594.

¹⁰⁰ Helmut Kuhn, ‘The True Tragedy: On the Relationship between Greek Tragedy and Plato, I’. *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 52 (1941): 1-40; Kuhn, ‘The True Tragedy: On the Relationship between Greek Tragedy and Plato, II’. *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 53 (1942): 37-88.

2.3. On Christianity and the Tragic

Some of these tensions continue to play out in the interpretation of tragedy within Christendom; but as we will suggest, their supposed opposition is more of a *modern* invention than intrinsic to the subject matter at hand. A full description of this topic is not possible in the space given, and so is here very restricted and eclectic in its scope. But nonetheless, from the representative examples given, it appears to be that the interaction of Christian theology to tragedy has not followed a linear mode of development. On the one side, there is a critique of tragedy that belongs to the wider antipathy towards pagan theatre, as seen in Tertullian, Novation, John Chrysostom, and Augustine – a movement that reached its apogee in Puritan iconoclasm.¹⁰¹ The decline of theatre in the East and West has been connected by some to the dissemination of Christian culture, especially after the reign of Constantine, as seen in the marked decrease in theatre construction in the period that succeeded it. However, the evidence is ambiguous, and might even reflect changing attitudes towards the theatre among pagans themselves.¹⁰² Nevertheless, even if there was a special causality between Christianity and the decline of theatre, this would apply to all dramatic presentation and not just tragedies.

Additionally, most patristic, medieval and post-Reformation thinkers did *not* express an especially antagonistic relationship to tragedy. In fact, the most stringent assertions of a contradiction between Christianity and the tragic have been made in the *modern* period, and appear to be predicated on a presumed antithesis between the respective metaphysics of Christianity and tragedy. It is argued, especially by certain literary critics, that these two visions cannot be reconciled. For instance, I. A. Richards has said that ‘The least touch of any theology which has a compensating Heaven to offer the tragic hero is fatal’.¹⁰³ George Steiner has persisted within similar lines when he says that since tragedy is concerned with absolute and irremediable loss, and Christianity is about eschatological recovery, their reconciliation remains unachievable.¹⁰⁴ Karl Jaspers also has concurred insofar as he says that ‘Der glaubende Christ anerkennt keine eigentliche Tragik mehr’,¹⁰⁵ a view repeated by D. D. Raphael¹⁰⁶ and Laurence Michel.¹⁰⁷ All of these are significant figures of influence, who have in many ways contributed to the perceived irreconcilability of Christian language and the

¹⁰¹ Jonas A. Barish, ‘The Antitheatrical Prejudice’. *Critical Quarterly* 8.2 (1966): 329-348.

¹⁰² Timothy Barnes, ‘Christians and the Theater,’ Ingo Gildenhard and Martin Revermann (eds.), *Beyond the Fifth Century: Interactions with Greek Tragedy from the Fourth Century BCE until the Middle Ages* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 315-334.

¹⁰³ I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1924), 230-231.

¹⁰⁴ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961); Steiner, ‘Tragedy, Pure and Simple’ in ed. M. S. Silk, *Tragedy and the Tragic*, 534-546; Steiner, *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 129-141; Steiner, ‘Tragedy, Reconsidered’. *New Literary History* 35.1 (2004): 1-15.

¹⁰⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Über das Tragische* (München: R. Piper & Vo Verlag, 1952), 48.

¹⁰⁶ D. D. Raphael, *The Paradox of Tragedy* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1960), 37-69.

¹⁰⁷ Laurence Michel, ‘The Possibility of a Christian Tragedy’, *Thought* 31 (1956): 403-28.

tragic. But in many ways, these modern critics and philosophers are working within a rather simplistic characterization that does not account for the complexity of these respective traditions, ‘Christianity’ and ‘the tragic’. Chief among them is George Steiner, who in many ways remains a key pivot within this development. Steiner is particularly interesting because he remains theologically literate, and was a close friend of Donald MacKinnon. However, he has been seriously criticized for his tendency to essentialise of the tragic, via the cipher of ‘absolute tragedy’. For Steiner, ‘absolute tragedy’ concerns sequences of resolute catastrophe and dereliction, events beyond any hope of restoration or amelioration. However, and because of this decision, Steiner also ends-up re-reading the canon of tragic literature through this lens, and as a result excludes significant examples that do not match up to his standard of the absolutely tragic. Here the ‘idea’ reigns supreme, and diversity is removed through an exclusionary focus.

In more recent times, theologians such as David Bentley Hart and John Milbank have, in a more nuanced fashion, expressed a continuing opposition between Christianity and the tragic. However, the anti-tragic reading of Christianity is not consistently upheld by all. One can see this in the nuanced comparisons given by Terry Eagleton who remains sharply critical of the anti-tragic reduction of Christianity and Marxism.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, amongst modern theologians, there has been a more commodious approach to tragic tropes and metaphors – a fact which is undoubtedly connected to a profounder sensitivity to human catastrophe, especially after the debaucheries of the twentieth century. In this vein, Christian theology has undergone a significant transformation, one in which there is a greater willingness to connect Christianity and the tragic can be seen, as is noticeable in several contemporaneous attempts to re-imagine the divine as a suffering entity. As regards the influence of tragic themes in modern theology, the list is continually expanding.¹⁰⁹ One could mention especially also collected volumes such

¹⁰⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); *Hope without Optimism* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2015).

¹⁰⁹ See especially Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics IV: The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, trans. Brian McNeil et al (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989); Balthasar, ‘Tragedy and Christian Faith,’ in *Explorations in Theology III: Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeill (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 391-411; Larry D. Bouchard, *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology: Evil in Cotemporary Drama and Religious Thought* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989); Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1990); Cyprian Krause, ‘Ist Christentum Tragisch? Die Bakchen des Euripides als Laboratorium metatragischer Stellvertretung: eine Hermeneutik zwischen Mysterium und Metapher,’ *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 103 (2006): 206-252; Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (London: Nisbet, 1938); Ilias Papagiannopoulos, ‘The Eschatology of the Self and the Birth of Being-with; Or, on Tragedy,’ in Neal DeRoo and John Panteleimon Manoussakis (eds.), *Phenomenology and Eschatology: Not Yet in the Now* (England: Ashgate, 2009), 103-119; Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005); Quash, ‘Christianity as Hyper-Tragic,’ in Christopher Hamilton, Otto Neumaier, Gottfried Schweiger and Clemens Sedmak (eds.), *Facing Tragedies. Perspectives on Social Ethics*, vol. 2 (Wien-Berlin-Münster: LIT Verlag, 2009), 77-88; Michael Rasche, ‘Das Phänomen des Tragischen und die tragische Dimension des Christentums,’ *Theologie und Philosophie* 89 (2014): 515-

as *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature, and Tragic Theory* (2011), edited by Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller,¹¹⁰ and also older volumes such as *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon* (1989), edited by Kenneth Surin.¹¹¹ Here it can be remarked that both of these volumes – and many of the above theologians and thinkers too – are deeply influenced by Donald MacKinnon. This indicates that he has a central place in the current debate regarding the perceived tensions between Christianity and the tragic, and that if one wants to deal with this relation, then MacKinnon remains a deeply important and controversial figure – but more on that later.

However, the appropriation of ‘the tragic’ within Christianity is not a recent development; on the contrary, tragedy has linkages to the Judeo-Christian tradition from early on. And as we will see, its reception is more variegated than modern portrayals would imply. To start with, scholars have noticed the similarity of biblical stories to tragic narratives, particularly within the Deuteronomistic History (Saul, David, etc.), with some even suggesting a reliance on Hellenistic sources.¹¹² One also cannot leave out Old Testament examples like Job, Lamentations or the Suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah, that is, in terms of substantial affinity if not actual dependence.¹¹³ One can also detect Hellenistic influence in the earliest sample we have of Jewish playwriting: the *Exagōgē* by Ezekiel the Tragedian (dated in the second century BCE), and of which only fragments have survived in Eusebius, Clement of Alexandria and Pseudo-Eustathius.¹¹⁴ Entering the Christian epoch, however, we discover a

533; David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998); David Tracy, ‘On Tragic Wisdom,’ in Hendrik M. Vroom (ed.), *Wrestling with God and Evil: Philosophical Reflections* (Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2007), 13-24; Tracy, ‘Horror and Horror: The Response of Tragedy’, *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 81.4 (2014): 739-767; Graham Ward, ‘Tragedy as Subclause: George Steiner’s Dialogue with Donald MacKinnon’, *Heythrop Journal* 34 (1993): 274-287; Ward, ‘Steiner and Eagleton: The Practice of Hope and the Idea of the Tragic’, *Literature & Theology* 19.2 (2005): 100-111; Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*. The Literary Agenda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹¹⁰ Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011

¹¹¹ Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989

¹¹² J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Thomas C. Römer, ‘Why Would the Deuteronomists Tell about the Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter?’ *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 77 (1998): 27-38.

¹¹³ Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428), for instance, already in his day thought that the Book of Job was patterned after Greek tragedy. During the Medieval period, theologians made comparisons between Job and Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, often reading it and as a pre-figuring of the suffering undertaken by Christ and the martyrs. In the Renaissance, the Jewish scholar Leone De’Sommi (in 1556) postulated – incorrectly, but due to a lack of historical knowledge this was understandable – that the theatre of the Occident was drawn from Hebrew sources rather than Greek, and that the Book of Job was ultimately if not the origin then at least the greatest early example of the tragic form. The Reformer Theodore Beza even turned it into a stage play. For these details, see Domenico Pietropaolo, ‘Whipping Jesus Devoutly: The Dramaturgy of Catharsis and the Christian Idea of Tragic Form,’ in *Beyond the Fifth Century*, 397-424 (pp. 399-401).

¹¹⁴ A translation of this text can be found in Ezekiel the Tragedian, ‘*Exagōgē*,’ trans. R. G. Robertson, in James Charlesworth (ED.), *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume 2* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1985), 803-819. For details on this, one can consult Rachel Bryant Davies, ‘Reading

panoply of receptions worth detailing.¹¹⁵ It should be admitted, by way of contextualization, that the Latin Fathers did not have much first-hand knowledge of tragedy: most of what they referenced were commonplace ideas regarding the genre, and was not by-and-large the result of an encounter with the Greek texts themselves (though there are significant exceptions, as with ninth century Irish scholar Sedulius Scotus). The exposure they did have, especially in medieval times, was due to the revival of Seneca and not primarily Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides. Such was not a new problem, since already in the fourth century BCE – as can be already seen in Aristotle’s *Poetics* – there is a significant amount of historical uncertainty regarding the origins of tragedy and its ideal form of production. This obscurity constitutes one explanation for the diversity of responses to the tragic genre, and theatre more generally. Another factor is the perceived detrimental influence of theatre on society: much like Plato, austere individuals such as Tertullian and Augustine were perturbed about the societal effects of tragic drama. The huge majority of negative references to tragedy within the early church stem from this trajectory – especially Tertullian and those who continued to reference him (e.g. Lactantius). Tertullian’s contributions, which are the most vociferous within ancient Christianity, were shaped by theatre’s connections to pagan rituals, and were thus primarily motivated by its affiliation to idolatry, and its provocation of base emotions. Augustine’s influential aversion to theatre was tied to its assumed connection to deception, as seen in his commentary on the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, where he equates thespianism with hypocrisy (*hypocrita*). But while these strains of interpretation were influential – as can be seen in the way such writings were co-opted after the Reformation – they certainly were not the only readings offered by ancient and medieval Christianity. Moreover, these critiques are directed at ancient drama *in toto*, and not simply tragic drama; they would have had just as much aversion to comedies, satyr-interludes or childhood pantomimes.

Overall, the Christian usage of tragic themes is either neutral or positive in its appropriation. Byzantine writers (e.g. Cassiodorus) could argue that theologians (such as the Cappadocians) had imitated or quoted Greek poetry and tragedy in their writings, and others like Ambrose of Milan had also made favourable comparisons between the Psalmist and the lyric of Attic tragedy (Bede made similar concessions regarding the Canticles). Beyond literary conceits, however, there are appropriations which sought to apply tragedy to actual *historical* events: people such as Fréculf and Rupert of Deutz described the history of the Jews in tragic terms– especially the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE as recounted by

Ezekiel’s *Exagoge*: Tragedy, Sacrificial Ritual, and the Midrashic Tradition’. *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 48 (2008): 393–415.

¹¹⁵ For most of what follows, see Carol Symes, ‘The Tragedy of the Middle Ages,’ in *Beyond the Fifth Century*, 335-369. Also cf. Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy from Aristotle to the Middle Ages*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 18 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993), 23-27, for some of the examples given.

Josephus.¹¹⁶ The beheading of John the Baptist, and the bacchanal surrounding his execution, is categorized in Euripidean imagery by Peter Chrysologus and Paschasius Radbertus. The poet Prudentius once described the martyrdom of St. Romanus as a ‘tragedy’, and Boethius (even more significantly) called the incarnation a ‘*tanta tragoedia*’ – a term which certainly alludes to the reversal of Christ’s *fortuna*. One can also find examples where war, and especially internecine conflict (national or otherwise), is described in the language of ‘tragedy’ (e.g. Peter the Deacon and Williams of Malmesbury). This idiom was eventually translated into an ecclesial context, as seen in the way that ‘the tragic’ was used to describe church schisms, here exemplified by Irenaeus’s lost treatise on the Nestorian crisis (which was entitled ‘Tragoidia’). This trend is continued in several church fathers: here ‘tragedy’ is equated with the schismatic crises of the church, as seen in some letters of Pope Leo I and Pope Gelasius I. Such a trajectory is also noticeable, more problematically, in the anti-Judaic tractates of this period, where the ‘heresies’ of the Jews are subjected to critical scorn by Christian teachers, and are described as ‘tragedies’.

What these references confirm is that already from early on Christian teachers were able to use the language of ‘the tragic’ in more expansive terms than is often realized. However, this is not the end: there were some significant *liturgical* and *sacramental* deployments within a couple of medieval thinkers which are particularly striking as well: Aribio Scholasticus could compare ‘harmonious’ and ‘inharmonious’ music with ‘tragedy’ and ‘comedy’ respectively, and even more suggestive is that writers (e.g. Sicard of Cremona) could compare the liturgical order of service to the structure of Greek drama, in which each of the various clergy occupied a role in a ecclesial theatre. Peter of Blois argued that stories of tragic misfortune could actually inspire repentance and self-examination among penitents, and that tragedy could have a transformational effect on its audience. A remarkable text is also found in *Gemma animae* of Honorius Augustodunensis where he seeks to conceptualize the Catholic Mass as a ‘tragedy’ in which the participants, through ritual signs, postures and utterances, are invited to repeat the narrative of Christ’s suffering in the present. Domenico Pietropaolo even argues that the Mass, after Honorius, could be read as providing the ontological rationale for Christian tragedy, constituting a ‘sacramental catharsis’ for participants within the drama of the Eucharist.¹¹⁷ Finally, it would be remiss not to mention here the ‘Christos Paschōn’ (Χριστός πάσχων) or ‘Christus Patiens,’ (originally attributed to Gregory Nazianzus, but now dated to the eleventh or twelfth century) which re-imagines the story of Pentheus in the language of Christian sacramentality, with the severed body of the tragic hero now being

¹¹⁶ Fréculf even postulated that the aetiology of ‘tragedy’ was to be found in the period of the Babylonian exile.

¹¹⁷ Pietropaolo, ‘Whipping Jesus Devoutly,’ 404. Also see the larger commentary on the *Gemma animae* in 401–402, which has some rather wonderful insights regarding the Mass as grounding the ontological possibility of tragic drama for the Christian church.

replaced with a crucified and sacramental body. It is certainly this theatrical aspect of Christian liturgy which inspired the mystery and passion plays of later periods. After the Reformation, it was Philipp Melanchthon, in his *Corhortatio* (1545) who— after drawing upon the revived interest in the *Poetics* after the publication of Alessandro Pazzi’s translation (1536) – promulgated an Aristotelian and Christianized reading of tragedy with the aim of asserting a moral symmetry between actions and consequences.¹¹⁸ These examples drawn from the history of the Christian church, while certainly not comprehensive in scope, give an indication of the complexity of reception.

In light of these appropriations, the question needs to be asked: why the perceived tension between Christianity and tragedy? If our previous narrative has demonstrated anything it is that Christianity has provided a diversity of strategies in appropriating or rejecting the tragic, and that there is not *one* method of appropriating it. What this suggests is that a projection of a supposed tension between Christianity and the tragic could be a largely *modern* invention that is not connected to the substance of the tradition. Then again, it might not resolve the problem completely. One would still need to address the claims of those theorists who assert incompatibility, precisely because there might substantive issues raised that were not noticed by earlier generations. For example: are these visions contradictory because Christianity imagines happy endings while tragedy only disastrous ones? Or does it lie within the different religious perspectives that characterize Greek religion and Judeo-Christianity respectively? Or can one say that the conflicts only lie between a *specific* kind of Christianity and particular sorts of tragedy?

Of these questions, it is the last possibility that appears the most penetrating. That is because conclusions about whether there is any conflict will imply a judgement that is generally informed but also context-specific, one that is related to *particular* tensions or contradictions that arise within their juxtaposition. If one speaks about ‘Christianity’ or ‘tragedy’ in general, one is bound to a level of abstractness that is not helpful for making adjudications. It depends on *what* Christianity of which you are speaking of, and *which* tragedy you are referring to. If someone, for instance, proposes a mode of confident or triumphalist religion, then one could conclude that this will sit rather uneasily with the tragic. Similarly, if one proposes that tragedy *qua* tragedy is about unmitigated disaster, then this will not cohere with Christianity as traditionally understood. But if one relaxes these extremes, can one conclude that the contradictions remain. Possibly not, but that does not necessarily resolve the tensions completely, because even if one could put forward an account of tragedy that was more congenial to Christian assumptions, or put forward a less

¹¹⁸ Michael Lurie, ‘Facing Up to Tragedy: Toward an Intellectual History of Sophocles in Europe from Camerarius to Nietzsche,’ in Kirk Ormand (ed.), *A Companion to Sophocles* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 440-461 (pp. 442-444).

triumphalist account, one still might not have not addressed other concerns – as can be seen in the contributions of David Bentley Hart and John Milbank, who will be discussed in Chapter 3.

We can exemplify this in the following way: it appears that some modern theologians who incorporate tragedy within theology are able to do so with greater alacrity because they have problems with traditional accounts of divine aseity and transcendence, insofar as they allow suffering to enter the Godhead (e.g. Balthasar, MacKinnon, Bulgakov, etc.). Within this theological stream, others take a leap and describe the trinity *ad intra* as an eternal tragedy of suffering love, initiated through a temporalisation of divinity within the cross and resurrection of Christ. This move necessitates a transcription of dramatic categories – of alienation and reconciliation – onto the divine life as such (e.g. Moltmann), which means that they are more open to the idea that God is subject to change and contingencies, in distinction from the ‘apathetic’ God of so-called ‘classical theism’.¹¹⁹ Such amenability implies a connection between the doctrine of God’s transcendence, and one’s willingness or not to absorb ‘the tragic’. This is so because if tragedy is concerned with historicity and suffering, then it

¹¹⁹ I am aware that ‘classical theism’ is a pejorative term in modern theology and that it has been heavily chided in recent times (e.g. Eberhard Jüngel, John Caputo, Richard Kearney, Jean-Luc Marion, etc.). I am not sure always however what it actually refers to, since the reference often shifts. Is one referring to the entire metaphysical (or ‘ontotheological’) tradition that has now, supposedly, been discarded by post-Heideggerian thought? If this is the case, then it has flaws as regards to historical genealogy (as we have suggested earlier). To take one example: one could query whether the priority of ‘possibility’ over ‘actuality’ (endorsed by Jüngel, Caputo, Kearney) is not itself a continuation of modern metaphysics since Scotus and Suárez. Strictly-speaking, it is this tradition which is the most ‘ontotheological’ and ‘metaphysical’ of them all (as Marion confirms). On top of this, one could suggest that the ‘omni-God’ of absolute power, which they reject, has more affinity for the nominalist conceptions of *potentia absoluta* than the God of the classical tradition. Similar criticisms have been directed towards Kearney by William Desmond (see William Desmond, ‘Maybe, Maybe Not: Richard Kearney and God,’ in John Panteleimon Manoussakis (ed.), *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn In Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 55-77). However, it can be said Marion should not be placed within the same trajectory. But even his more nuanced approach appears not to appreciate the complexity of early Christian thought, especially as regards its analogical re-conception of ‘being’, insofar as it resisted modelling the divine ‘being’ after finite causality. This has been pointed out by David Bentley Hart, John Milbank and Rowan Williams. But returning to Caputo, Jüngel, and Kearney once more, it appears that they might have slightly different foci in relation to ‘classical theism’. For his part, Jüngel continues a Lutheran-Barthian opposition to ‘metaphysics’ in general, and Aristotle in particular. Moreover, he is critical of Thomism insofar as it proposes an overly-negative account of divinity, one that excludes any cognoscibility and speakability of the divine nature. However, one should point out Rudi Te Velde’s excellent monograph entitled *Aquinas on God: The ‘Divine Science’ of the Summa Theologiae* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), which argues that Thomas escapes a ‘classical theism’ of this kind. As regards Kearney and Caputo, one wonders (as Fergus Kerr suggests) whether their proposals are not largely a poetically-inclined reaction to the ‘neo-scholastic apologetics’ of manual Thomism (See Fergus Kerr, ‘Book Review: *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, edited by Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmermann (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016).’ *Modern Theology* 33.2 (2017): 325-327). But if this is so, what does one make of the *ressourcement* tradition of *nouvelle théologie* (Lubac, Balthasar, Ratzinger, etc.) which is also opposed to Baroque neo-Thomism insofar as it constituted, for them, a departure *from* the classical and patristic vision? One could suggest then that if by ‘classical theism’ one is referring to the dry and rationalistic traditions of the neo-scholastics, then one is referring not to the ‘classical’ or ‘Thomistic’ tradition, but rather to an early modern development.

follows that if God is ontologically implicated in these dynamics, then one has less anxiety about the problem of tensions. However, if one is predisposed to a more orthodox accounts of divine aseity (e.g. David Bentley Hart, John Milbank), then there does seem to be a corresponding suspicion that incorporating ‘the tragic’ or a ‘tragic theology’ into Christianity will lead to doctrinal aporias. But this is not a complete picture since there are still other thinkers, who also assume God’s aseity, but who remain nonetheless more open to the insights that ‘tragedy’ might provide (e.g. Graham Ward, Rowan Williams, etc.). The fact that these latter thinkers are more disposed to accept tragedy as a theological trope implies that a more classical rendering of God might *not* be opposed to such a procedure. But if this is the case, where does the problem lie then? Without being reductionist, it seems that the central problematic might not just be an abstract problem, but much like Plato’s Socrates, is also centred on a figure. That figure, we would suggest, is Donald MacKinnon, a thinker who has served (over several decades) as the catalyst in the discussion of tragedy and transcendence within the contemporary theological scene. In other words, it appears that this debate is not simply focused on conceptual tensions that have arisen in recent times, but that they are concretized (at least for modern theology) within the reception of a specific person.

Donald MacKinnon (1913-1994) was a Christian philosopher who had a seminal impact on British academia in the latter half of the twentieth century. Already then, theologians, philosophers, playwrights, and intellectuals absorbed his teaching, many of whom went on to have a significant impact on the intellectual culture of the British Isles. Some of these include heavyweights such as Philippa Foot, Mary Midgely and Iris Murdoch, the playwright Tom Stoppard, the literary critic George Steiner, and, more pertinently for our immediate purposes, theologians such as Fergus Kerr, Nicholas Lash, and Rowan Williams. MacKinnon also had a seminal impact more generally, and has been credited with reversing the tide of British theology against the liberalism of 1960’s towards a more intellectually robust and subtle defence of theological orthodoxy.¹²⁰ This trajectory can be further seen in other theological movements such as Radical Orthodoxy, which in many ways trace their lineage to the influence of MacKinnon at Cambridge. Central figures such as John Milbank and Graham Ward have admitted this as much.¹²¹ But one could ask: why should MacKinnon have a centrality in this discussion? Firstly, he was a thinker who, by all accounts, has had the greatest impact in the revived interrelation of tragedy and theology. It was a question which he was intensely engaged with, as his academic output will show. Furthermore, even beyond his students, his influence on this question is wide-spread, as can be seen in his reiterating

¹²⁰ On this see, Rowan Williams, ‘John A. T. Robinson (1919-1983): *Honest to God* and the 1960s,’ in *Anglican Identities* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2004), 103-120.

¹²¹ Cf. Danie Goosen and Jaco Kruger, Radical Orthodoxy – Panel Discussion between Profs Graham Ward, John Milbank, Danie Goosen and Dr Jaco Kruger’. *Acta Theologica*, Supplementum 25 (2017): 1-28. See especially p. 5 and p. 9.

presence within volumes such as *Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature, and Tragic Theory* – never mind the books and research dissertations that have been written on similar themes. Secondly, MacKinnon broadened the question of ‘the tragic’ to include not only tragedy as a literary genre, but also the larger questions of time and historicity and their bearing on moral deliberation, seeking to show the connection of the tragic to the questions of life. Thirdly, his teaching had an influence not only on the orthodoxy of his students, but also on their reception of tragic themes. It is not coincidental that it is from these thinkers – all with links to Cambridge – that some of the most intelligent defences and critiques of ‘tragic theology’ have arisen. Rowan Williams’s influence on John Milbank is well-known – more generally but also on the question of the tragic – and Milbank in turn has had a significant influence on David Bentley Hart, who both spent significant periods at the universities of Cambridge and Virginia. It is particularly the latter two thinkers who have provided the most trenchant responses to his influence as regarding the tragic. Therefore, since MacKinnon has had such a central place within these debates, one concludes that he should serve as a lodestar in our discussion.

But the question remains: what is the substance behind their differing responses? Why is it that theologians who are very similar in many other regards, come to different conclusions regarding ‘the tragic’, and ultimately the reception of MacKinnon’s work itself? And if these differences are significant, can they be ameliorated? Admittedly, some questions have already been addressed by Rowan Williams in *The Tragic Imagination* (2016) for example. But it is arguable that Williams, while dealing with many of the significant areas of conflict (as put forward by Steiner, Milbank and Hart) does not deal with *all* of their substantial disagreements. This is where our present study tries to make a contribution. As will be shown, continuing disagreements, which Williams as such does not address, occur within the following areas, namely, (1) the arena of *metaphysics*, especially as it relates to transcendent being and historicity, (2) the question of *genealogy*, as it relates to the impact of Kantianism on the reception of tragic themes (and its impact in turn on MacKinnon himself), and (3) its connection to *politics*, especially as regards the impact of ontological pessimism on socio-political arrangements. All of these tendencies, I will argue, are related to the configuration of *transcendence*, specifically as regards transcendent goodness and aseity. With this in mind, the central question of this study can be posed again: within the modern theological context and debate, can one reconcile a classical account of infinite and transcendent goodness – as put forward by Hart, Milbank and Williams – with the insights of the tragic? This problem raises the question of coherency, with all its intellectual, doctrinal and spiritual overtones. Or more specifically: what kind of Christian metaphysics provides the greatest level of cogency in relation to questions of transcendence, without repressing the difficulties that the tragic exposes. It is to these questions that we turn to in the next chapter.

In this chapter, we suggested that a supposed opposition between Christian theology and the tragic does *not* have a deep history within the tradition; rather, the reception of the tragic is more diverse and complicated than a homogenous narrative allows. Our argument was both conceptual and historical: it tried to ask where the node of the contention really lies, with the aim of reaching our research question. Our query, broadly-speaking, is concerned with the relationship between classical Christianity and the tragic, and as we will see shortly, how this is centred on the problem of transcendence. But at this stage, our method was more probing, asking where and why perceptions of conflict might have arisen. To do this we began the chapter by discussing tragedy itself, as well as the debate between Plato and the poets. There I suggested that the tensions, while not without substance, are not immune to deconstruction both from *within* tragedy and Plato himself. As we saw, tragedy is not opposed to philosophy and Platonism is not irreconcilable with tragedy. Moreover, even though Platonism did influence some early Christian rejections of ancient drama, it was not decisive in its impact throughout. This raises the question once more of where the real tensions lie in the debate. Here we wagered that the tensions, specifically as regard classical Christianity and the tragic, might be more recent than ancient in origin. We suggested that such assertions of contradiction might be traceable to tendencies within literary criticism, which has sometimes espoused a more strenuous opposition between Christian theology and tragedy. In this light, we mentioned John Milbank and David Bentley Hart as being possible inheritors of this recent trajectory. It was in this setting that we introduced Donald MacKinnon, and the importance he has had in the debate regarding the theology and the tragic, here specifically as regards the question of transcendence. But at this stage, many of these questions have been left open-ended and await development within the chapters to follow.

But one question seems especially pertinent at the moment: what do I mean by a classical account of ‘transcendence’? In the next chapter, I hope to provide some answers with the aim of showing their connection to the research question. I also hope to render lucid some of the interconnections between ‘transcendence’ and ‘the tragic’, with purpose of deepening our thesis that the supposed abrasiveness between classical metaphysics and the tragic has been strengthened by modern developments.

Chapter 3

Tragedy and Transcendence: A Quest for Coherency

This chapter aims to lay bare some of the theological assumptions which will be advanced in this study. As was intimated previously, it appears that claims of an incompatibility between ‘Christianity’ vis-à-vis ‘the tragic’ depends upon how one substantiates those terms. There it was wagered that the assertion of contradiction might be a more recent phenomenon in intellectual history, bound up with proximate trends in the recent past. However, the reason for this development was only hinted at: on the one hand, the opposition between Christianity and the tragic was exacerbated by some literary critics who might be working with a rather jaundiced conception of Christian theology – which is illuminated when one compares their swift juxtapositions with the more elaborate comparisons of Terry Eagleton.¹²² But on the other hand, this admission did not resolve the issue completely, because some modern theologians – who are fully apprised of Christianity’s complexity – still remain adamant that irreconcilable tensions persist. Exemplary of this trend are David Bentley Hart and John Milbank. Our suggestion as to why this is so was sought within their continued commitment to a classical metaphysics and Christian orthodoxy, with a particular regard for their espousals of aseity and transcendence. Of course, these suggestions are only anticipations of a more complete exposition of their work, and the tensions these *might* create when compared with a more tragically-slanted theology. Because of this, conclusions cannot be asserted as of yet. However, what can be stated here at the outset is that I remain in agreement with many of the concerns of these authors, more generally, including what is to my mind their nuanced repetition of a classically-informed metaphysics. I am persuaded that Hart and Milbank are neither pious reactionaries nor practitioners of fusty mystification, but thoughtful exponents of a renewed orthodoxy within our so-called ‘postmodern’ epoch. Because of this, I assume a significant amount of their insights, as will be seen in the developing argument. However, there are some clear disagreements on my part, especially (as we shall see) as regards the applicability of tragic themes to Christian orthodoxy. It will become apparent in what is to follow that I have a great sympathy for the account of Donald MacKinnon as this has been critically supplemented by the scholarship of Rowan Williams. Both of these thinkers, within differing degrees of acceptance, show adherence to a more classical ‘orthodoxy’ while at the same time remain deeply informed by the insights of ‘the tragic’. But what are my

¹²² See again Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); *Hope without Optimism* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2015).

assumptions regarding that loaded term ‘classical metaphysics’, especially as regards the problem of transcendence? And why is there a continuing perception that Christianity and the tragic are finally conflictive? In this chapter, I seek clarity regarding the terminology of ‘transcendence’, here with the assistance of Rowan Williams and John Webster. I outline how this tradition has construed the metaphysics of transcendence, with the aim of articulating, against misconstructions, what it really affirms and what it does not. Such remains important for ‘coherency’ and sense-making, since systematic theology remains implicitly committed to the idea of an ultimately rational order, one that is predicated on the unity and simplicity of divine action. But since it is this classical tradition in particular which has expressed a marked tension regarding tragedy and theology in recent times, it is important to analyse *why* these tensions have arisen, with the purpose of asking whether they can be ameliorated. This tension can be most clearly seen in three trends that have developed in the *modern* deployment of ‘the tragic’, all of which have a connection to the ontological topology of transcendence, namely: *the post-Kantian sublime*, *the idea of a suffering God*, and *a rejection of the privatio boni*.

3.1. On Divine Transcendence and Aseity

My purpose is not to give a comprehensive treatment of divine aseity. Rather, it is attuned to whether a reading of God’s transcendent goodness is suitably pared with *the negativity of the tragic*, that is, with the way that tragedy challenges and even undermines overly-harmonious perspectives of order within the cosmos. Here already, the demand of ‘coherency’ becomes stringent, as will become recognizable shortly. But it is worthwhile at the outset to establish the doctrinal contours of a classical account of divine transcendence, so that we may have clarity on what we are speaking about. At the outset, it should be said that ‘transcendence’ has several valences which need to be clarified, and which are by no means univocal, especially between diverse epistemic regimes (e.g. literature, religion, philosophy, psychology, aesthetics, etc.).¹²³ In our own register, one could say that ‘transcendence’ has to do with what is *non-negotiable* or *intractable* within experience, with those events that arrest and carry us beyond ourselves; or by adopting Karl Jasper’s terms, we say that ‘transcendence’ pertains to our encounters with liminality and limit-situations.¹²⁴ However, a lexicon of ‘transcendence’ also presupposes that we speak of ‘immanence’, since we cannot understand ‘transcendence’ without grasping what it is transcendent *to*. Moreover, these concepts are asymmetric because

¹²³ See Ingolf U. Dalferth, ‘Ereignis und Transzendenz’. *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 110 (2013): 475-500 for the differing ‘grammars’ of transcendence that occur in an interdisciplinary context.

¹²⁴ For more reflection on this, see Jonna Bornemark, ‘Limit-situation: Antinomies and Transcendence in Karl Jaspers’ Philosophy’. *Sats – Nordic Journal of Philosophy* 7.2 (2006): 51-73.

it is firstly ‘transcendence’ that allows us to understand the distinction initially, and is what gives ‘immanence’ its sense of being derived *from* something. This means that immanence-as-such remains semantically undecipherable apart from its connection to transcendence. This distinction is a useful one, but some more are required: since all projections of transcendence remain within the immanent, one needs to make a distinction not only between the *transcendent-as-such* (e.g. the Absolute, the One, God, etc.) and *immanent-as-such* (e.g. the cosmos, created beings, history etc.), but one must also distinguish between the transcendent and immanent as it appears *within* the immanent-as-such. Ingolf Dalferth has framed this distinction as *absolute* and *relative* forms of transcendence.¹²⁵ *Absolute* transcendence speaks to those realities that exist independently from *relative* transcendence, those apart from which no immanence could be postulated (e.g. God, the Unmoved Mover, etc.). *Relative* transcendence encapsulates those moments of transcending *within* the immanent world, as seen paradigmatically within religious practices, moments of self-transcendence or rituals of transition (e.g. conversion, *rites de passages*, falling in love, etc.). Such transitions occur in the movement between events of anticipation and events of transformation, those passages between ignorance and knowledge. Self-transcendence is *relative* because regardless of the magnitude of elevation, it always remains within immanence. This is not to say that *relative* transcendence is incapable of intimating *absolute* transcendence, but rather that its speculative grasp is always non-absolute.¹²⁶

The above clarifications should help us, but we should register its complications – not only for the sake of accuracy but because it also anticipates some themes that will be engaged later. These complications relate to the contrastive *dualism* that is presupposed in transcendence-immanence language. The first concern is that, genealogically-speaking, ‘immanence’ has its first occurrence in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*.¹²⁷ This rather late occurrence should give pause before we impose such language on older traditions. Such a suspicion is deepened further when we realize that the earliest definition of the transcendence-immanence duality is found in Immanuel Kant, namely in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. There his treatment of this duality, within the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’, served to delimit the metaphysical reach of the rational

¹²⁵ Ingolf Dalferth, ‘The Idea of Transcendence,’ in Robert Bellah and Hans Joas (eds.), *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 146-188. However, our distinction has a slightly different resonance since it does not share Dalferth’s anti-Platonism or his Reformed antipathy towards the *analogia entis*.

¹²⁶ I have also consulted the typology of Wessel Stoker contained in ‘Culture and Transcendence: A Typology,’ in Wessel Stoker and W. L. van der Merwe (eds.), *Looking Beyond? Shifting Views of Transcendence in Philosophy, Theology, Art, and Politics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 5-28. As per the type of ‘transcendence’ here presented – understood as aseity, analogical participation, etc. – we think that it traverses Stoker’s categories of ‘immanent transcendence’, ‘radical transcendence’, and ‘transcendence as alterity’..

¹²⁷ For what follows, see Johannes Zachhuber, ‘Transzendenz und Immanenz als Interpretationskategorien antiken Denkens im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert,’ in N. MacDonald and I. de Hulster (eds.), *Divine Presence and Absence* (Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen 2013), 23–54.

powers. Kant's transcendentalism had a seminal impact on this usage within German Idealism and in the so-called *Pantheismusstreit*— a trajectory that found its way into the interpretation of ancient philosophy and early Christianity. This schematic was certainly creative, and instituted a significant amount of original thinking and research. But one cannot avoid the conclusion that this paradigm, in retrospect, also led to a misreading of ancient categories of thought, especially as regards modernity's secularizing division between the immanent and the transcendent.

The second concern is an explicitly theological one: the grammar of aseity is misconstrued within a dualistic or conflictive approach, as has been argued by John Webster and Rowan Williams.¹²⁸ Webster distances a more traditional account of divine aseity from an approach that establishes content through a contrast with contingency.¹²⁹ He reckons, here following the principle of *Deus non est in genere*, that the 'theological usage [of] aseity is not primarily a comparative or contrastive concept', since 'the content of the term cannot be determined simply by analysis of the difference between God and contingent creatures'.¹³⁰ On the contrary, the doctrine of aseity references 'the glory and plenitude of the life of the Holy Trinity in its self-existent and self-moving originality', as well as 'its underived fullness'. It is this plenitude which 'constitute[s] the ground of his self-communication'.¹³¹ Such grammar is obscured when *aseitas* becomes about whether 'contingent reality is to be secured by a ground of existence beyond itself'. On this model, aseity is 'inseparably attached to, and expounded in terms of, the contingency of the world', leading to a 'curious irony' in that the 'divine self-existence itself becomes a derivative concept'.¹³² With this move, the language of aseity appears less a matter of doxological affirmation, and is instead reduced to a functional causality (such as Descartes's *causa sui*, that *bête noire* of Heideggerian genealogy). Here, divinity is understood in 'largely nonagential and nonpersonal' terms,¹³³ becoming 'detached from the theological metaphysics of God's immanent and economic love', and is 'reduced to the bare self-positing cause of created reality'.¹³⁴ In contrast to this, Webster argues that it is

¹²⁸ To put it simplistically: in these two essays, Webster focuses more on the trinity while Williams more on divine oneness. Neither is to the exclusion of the other, but is simply a question of emphasis.

¹²⁹ John Webster, 'Life in and of Himself: Reflections on God's Aseity,' in Bruce L. McCormack (ed.), *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (Grand Rapids and Edinburgh: Baker Academic and Rutherford House, 2008), 107-124.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 110. It is for this reason that Webster is critical of the language of God as *causa sui* and *ens necessarium* (pp. 117-119) – the *causa sui* because it implies a notion of temporal causation, a postulated 'before' which preceded actualization, which obviously creates problems for any affirmation of divine eternity or immutability – the *ens necessarium* because it remains too entwined with a contrastive and functional approach, since the language of 'necessity' always implies a necessity *for* something. On this point, Eberhard Jüngel's statement that God is 'more than necessary' most certainly lies in the background.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

the divinity's 'triune character' that is 'the distinguishing feature of the Christian confession of God's aseity': 'God *a se* is the perfection of paternity, filiation, and spiration in which he is indissolubly from, for, and in himself and out of which he bestows himself as the Lord, Saviour, and partner of his creature'.¹³⁵ In this light, the trinitarian structure of aseity can be concisely expressed in this way: '*God is from himself, and from himself God gives himself...Aseity is life: God's life from and therefore in himself*'.¹³⁶

Nonetheless, some further distinctions need to be made: while we must speak of 'the aseity common to all three persons by virtue of their sharing in the divine essence', as regards aseity as a 'personal property', this belongs only to the Father: 'although all the persons of the Trinity are *a se* according to essence, the Father alone is *a se* according to person'.¹³⁷ What Webster means is that while the Son is 'eternally begotten of the Father', he is not 'as Son, *a se*, since he does not share the Father's property of being *anarchon*'. But Webster quickly adds that this 'does not entail that the Son is in some manner subsequent to or inferior to the Father', because 'The Son's generation is eternal' and 'not a "coming-to-be" as the Father's creature but a relation which is constitutive of the divine essence and the identity of Father as well as of the Son'.¹³⁸ Conceptualizing triune relations so implies that there is no distinction between God's eternal self-distinction and eternal self-giving *in se* and his existence as being *a se*.¹³⁹ And it is this distinction *ad intra* which is the ontological basis for the divine mission *ad extra*, since 'the life which the Son receives and has in himself is that which he in turn bestows upon creatures...if aseity differentiates the divine Son from creatures, it is also at the same time the ground of his saving gift'.¹⁴⁰ So while not collapsing the economic into the immanent trinity, Webster holds these movements together: 'God's aseity, although it marks God's utter difference from creatures, does not entail isolation, for what God is and has of himself is life and this life includes a self-willed movement of love'.¹⁴¹

Rowan Williams's reflections are framed by an awareness of the 'impatience' surrounding language of divine oneness and aseity.¹⁴² For this stream, an orthodox conceptualization of divine unity imagines God as 'a solitary transcendent individual' within an 'abstract theism'. This schema, so the story goes, promotes a 'thinking of the unity of the divine nature ... as giving a kind of priority to some reality lying behind the concrete relationality of God to God

¹³⁵ Ibid., 113.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 114.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 115.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 116.

¹³⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 123: God's life is about '*inseity* as much as *aseity*'.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 121.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 123.

¹⁴² Rowan Williams, 'God,' in David F. Ford, Ben Quash & Janet Soskice (eds.), *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Study for the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 75-89 (p. 75).

as Trinity'.¹⁴³ In this light, feminist and process theologians have advocated 'a more obviously immanentist account' of a divinity who acts as 'an endlessly resourceful manager of suffering and change'.¹⁴⁴ But Williams wonders whether these tendencies have internalized the implications of their revisions, and he also doubts whether these count as accurate readings of the tradition. He asserts that the classical rendering of transcendent being, on the contrary, has included many of the concerns which its critics raise. Moreover, Williams is also not insensitive to how the language of 'being' invokes controversial resonances within 'the politics of discourse'.¹⁴⁵ Nonetheless, he asserts that the postmodern rejection of metaphysics capitulates even more blatantly to these temptations, especially as regards the question of power. In the name of rejecting hierarchical models of deity,¹⁴⁶ they have left the dynamics of power intact, rather than undermining their premises.

Now advocates of the revisionist model claim that they have the Bible on their side, which appears to portray God as having anthropomorphic traits. Williams does not respond to these claims extensively in this essay (though Thomas Weinandy does in a monograph referenced by him¹⁴⁷). He does nonetheless engage with the scriptural tradition: for instance, he argues that the Old Testament portrays a God whose 'claims on the human community are not the claims of a divine monarch to worship only, but are identical with the claims of justice between human agents and strangers'.¹⁴⁸ This is because 'God is not an object competing for attention', since 'to know God is to be involved in the entire range of actions specified by law', as exemplified in the way in which the knowledge of God is paralleled to Israel's commitment to compassion (*hesed*). For Israel, there is no religious sector cordoned off from the rest of its life: one's cultic dedication to YHWH is inseparable from the enactment of reciprocity. God's being is not a thing amongst others, but is that which gives meaning to the

¹⁴³ Ibid., 75.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 76. He goes on to say (p. 76) that 'A suffering and mutable God (such as is said to be found in the Bible) must be, in a very strong sense, a psychological subject comparable to ourselves; an immanent God is not obviously a subject in anything like this sense. The virtues of the mutable God are sometimes argued in terms of the need to say what must be said about God's compassion; but this is difficult to state intelligibly if God's subjectivity is not, at the level that matters, different from the totality of the experience of contingent subjects.'

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 86.

¹⁴⁶ 'Revisionist models of divine life in terms of passibility and so on have commonly been innocent or simplistic about [the politics of discourse]. The typical protest on behalf of emancipatory concerns has been that the traditional view sets in philosophical concrete a hierarchically ordered model of reality in which mind is privileged over feeling, spirit over body, male over female and so on; God's transcendence (including, for some writers, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*) as expressed in the classical 'attributes' places God in irreconcilable opposition to a world of chance and vulnerability. God becomes a metaphysical transcription of unexamined power structures in the world' (ibid., 86).

¹⁴⁷ Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 40-82. I am aware of the critical debate surrounding Weinandy's work. See Marcel Sarot, 'Does God Suffer?' *Ars Disputandi* [<http://www.ArsDisputandi.org>] 1 (2001); Thomas G. Weinandy, 'Does God Suffer?' *Ars Disputandi* [<http://www.ArsDisputandi.org>] 2 (2002). However, also see the analysis of the biblical tradition in Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 37-46.

¹⁴⁸ Williams, 'God,' 77.

whole: ‘God’s relation to the chosen community is thus *not* an element in the community’s life...it is the constitutive fact for there being a community at all’.¹⁴⁹ The implication to be drawn from this is that ‘divine life can’t be discussed in the terms in which we speak of finite activity, as a contingent and interdependent reality’.¹⁵⁰ It was for this reason that early Christianity (drawing on Platonic categories) spoke of God as ‘beyond being’, insofar as ‘God’s nature’ was ‘characterised primarily by the stripping away of the attributes of contingent agency’. This was done because ‘Action, for the agent within the universe, is always bound up with response, passivity as well as initiative’.¹⁵¹ The same could not be said for God. As regards the New Testament, and especially Pauline language of the weakness of the cross, he thinks that the identification of God with suffering tends to obviate the rhetorical overtones of Paul’s texts.

Paul’s language is professedly a way of asking where we might expect to discern God in the world’s experience, and displaying how God’s actual presence upsets those expectations. To read it as endorsing a projection onto God of the vulnerability of subjects in the world is, ironically, to remove the upset by removing the paradox. If God as such is vulnerable in the sense that we are, God becomes a case of contingent passibility and discerning God in the cross of Jesus or in the action of grace in the poor, the voiceless, the failed and the spiritually incompetent is no longer surprising. What has been changed by the emancipatory move in theology is the locus of power and of suffering, not the nature of power relations themselves.¹⁵²

For ancient Christians and theologians, God does not appear in the world as an item amongst others, but is rather the personal act of being that gives existence to all things. God is *not-other* to finite beings, but exists beyond all relativized difference – a point summarized by Nicholas of Cusa’s *non aliud*, and contemporized by Michel de Certeau. According to Williams, Certeau managed to re-envisage the language of transcendence within the context of secularity. He does this through the concept of *heterology*, which describes a theological discourse that would ‘not describe a set of independent things’, but would offer ‘an

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 78.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 78.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 78-79.

¹⁵² Ibid., 86-87. Williams goes on to illustrate this through a reference to British culture: ‘To put it a little mischievously, it is like the demand made by sections of the British public in the wake of the death of Princess Diana that the Queen should show public signs of grief. What consoles is that the powerful should become vulnerable (‘interesting and weak like us’ in W. H. Auden’s telling phrase). And what is left unchallenged is how power is conceived. The difference of transcendence as specified in the Christian narrative is eroded’ (p. 87). The reference to Auden is taken from *For the Time Being*, and is found in the section entitled ‘The Massacre of Innocents’. This can be found in W. H. Auden, *Collected Longer Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 187.

‘equivocal’ account of their significance – or, more accurately, of their *reality*.’ Theology would no longer then focus on what remains ‘hidden’ within the discourses it encounters, but on what remains ‘un-said’.¹⁵³ Williams argues that Certeau’s account of Christianity – in which the absent body of Christ who opens up a multiplicity of responses – remains non-competitive in its relation to other knowledge-regimes.¹⁵⁴ To assert Christian difference does not mean that religious practice is defined over-against other human practices: rather, ‘it allows what religious discourse purports to be about’, namely, a ‘place at the source of communicative action’ which should avoid ‘any battle to secure a place among other places for ‘the religious’’.¹⁵⁵ For Williams, a Christianized heterology serves as a cultural ‘transcription’ of Aquinas’s doctrine of God’s Being as ‘pure act’ (*actus purus*).¹⁵⁶

Divine action can be ‘pure’ only if it is in no sense in ‘negotiation’ with specific agencies. And so far from this leaving us with a God uninvolved in creation’s life – as the polemic of revisionist theologies so often suggests – this allows some grasp of what is being claimed in saying that God is ‘pure’ *giver* (and therefore that any talk of God’s favour or grace or goodwill must be a way of honouring the primacy of God’s action rather than a drama of seeking and winning a desired reaction).¹⁵⁷

The idea of God-as-pure-act is an alternative to the theological revisionism of modernity, in which God is paralleled to finite agency, because if God changes or suffers, then we have to concede ‘that there are agents or agencies that are strictly external to the agency of God’. This remains the case ‘even if we grant that God is in some way the ultimate source of their existence’, whereby the act of ‘creation...bestows on them a life on the other side of an ontological frontier such that they may [also] modify not only each other but their source’. This paradigm, at first glance, appears to offer respite for North Atlantic post-theism, where traditional metaphysics no longer seems to hold sway. However, its comes at a price: ‘If the source is in this way modifiable, is it still possible to say that it is unequivocally the source of the meanings constructed or enacted in the world? And if it is not to be thought of as source, it has to be thought of as standing with, negotiating with or even contesting other possible

¹⁵³ Cf. *ibid.*, 80: For a discussion of this theme in the work of Certeau, see F. C. Bauerschmidt, ‘The Otherness of God’. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.2 (2001): 349-364.

¹⁵⁴ Bauerschmidt wonders whether Certeau’s preference for ‘absence’ and the language of ‘departure’ becomes a rather formalist gesture that is superimposed onto diverse materials. He also suggests that Certeau himself tended to collapse the particularity of the Christ event into the plurality of meaning opened up by Pentecost, thus failing to emphasize that, for the New Testament and the early Church, the Spirit always remained the Spirit *of* Christ, and was tied to a form of lived specificity that should not be evacuated simply because it created a diversity of receptions; cf. F. C. Bauerschmidt, ‘The Abrahamic Voyage: Michel de Certeau and Theology’. *Modern Theology* 12.1 (1996): 1–26.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

meanings'. And does this not, ultimately, presuppose the conflictive model that revisionists want to avoid? And how is this distinguishable from what John Milbank has described as 'ontological violence'?¹⁵⁸ If this is the case, then it has deleterious implications for the spiritual life,¹⁵⁹ and also promotes a metaphysics that ontologizes conflict; this is because

if there is no guaranteed 'triumph' for God, if contest is perpetual and unresolved, we are stuck with a metaphysic (the fact that it is commonly presented as a kind of alternative to metaphysics is irrelevant) in which what is unambiguously good has no necessary relation to how things fundamentally are, or are thinkable. Good becomes a function of the will, separated from 'nature', as in the familiar forms of debased Kantianism, and from intellect. If the former problem (God as an agency confronting others) tends to a reduction of God to an item in the world, the latter allies the reality of God to the workings of an 'inner' life, detaching God from the processes of learning that take place in a material and historical environment. In plainer terms, while the former interprets God's existence as being on the same footing as that of contingent realities, the latter moves towards evacuating talk of God's existence of all content.¹⁶⁰

There is a lot in here which will re-appear again in this study: if God is the subject of change or suffering *in se*, then one could suggest that we have baptized competitive violence, since the Good has no necessary linkage with reality, but only 'goods' that are produced without any ontological basis for harmonization. In this quotation, we can see that this matrix of assertions – passibility, ontological violence, evil-as-privation, the primacy of the will, and the Kantian sublime – have a connection to the question of aseity. Without it, so Williams argues, the Good itself becomes de-natured, and God is conceived within a regime of the sublime that denies the deity's transcendent goodness and perfection. Moreover, it places God within the scope of ontotheology, since (on this model) God acts like a finite cause. On the

¹⁵⁸ '...to claim that the divine action can be trusted to prevail (following some varieties of process thought which privilege the resourcefulness of love while allowing a kind of passibility to God) is only to claim that, in the long run, God has more resource than other agents. The story remains one of contest and victory rather than the complex convergence imagined by classical theology and spirituality between growth in integrity and actualisation as a creature and conformity with the 'will' or 'purpose' of God. And thus conversion, sanctification and so on become precisely the kind of issues they are regularly represented as being in modern, emancipatory theological rhetoric: they are about power, who has it and who doesn't, who has more of it, what counts as power and so on' (ibid., 83).

¹⁵⁹ 'If God comes to be characterised as an agent among agents...[i]t is not clear how [the practice of] contemplation can be conceived...as an embodiment of the other in the self, since two agencies are bound to be confronting each other within a contested 'territory'. When one triumphs, that constitutes a clear representation or inscription of God within the world. Once again, there is an underlying issue about power, about the risks of identifying some area of the world's discourse unambiguously with God' (Ibid., 84).

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 84-85.

traditional account, God as creator (who is not in competition to creatures) brings everything into a ‘natural’ relation to the Good, without hereby denying the freedom of creatures.¹⁶¹ To enter into the Good is to become more creaturely and more human. But if one conceives God as subjected to temporal process, then that means that the divine nature also is subjected to that same historical logic, and the Good is no longer considered as unchangeable. But now since the world has no metaphysical or ‘necessary’ connection to goodness, this means that there is no created aptitude for this, in the sense that finite being now has no more ‘natural’ affinity for either goodness or evil. It is purely a matter of voluntary imposition one way or the other.

Our excursus on the question of aseity and transcendence has served to outline its contours, as it has appeared within the classical tradition of theology. What we have seen is that if our concept of aseity is diminished or misread then the grammar of theology is fundamentally changed. If God is mutable or suffers in se, then this has some significant consequences: if the Good, which is convertible with Infinite Being, does not hold some kind of eschatological finality or priority in relation to evil, then goodness no longer has a more intrinsic position in reality, and evil (or material conflict) ascends into an equivalency with the Good. Beatitude as a result becomes less a moral attuning to reality, and rather a voluntary imposition. And since there is no necessary connection between goodness and being itself, the universal compass of the Good is unsustainable. There are other problems also: if God is the not the infinite source of all things, but rather an eternal manager of change ‘outside’ of God- – since there is an externality which is not included within divine infinity– then can we even speak of ‘creation’ as *creatio ex nihilo*? One must admit that it remains difficult, as confirmed by contemporary process thought (e.g. Catherine Keller, Mary-Jane Rubenstein, John Caputo, etc.). Moreover, a denial of a non-rivalrous aseity creates Christological aporias also, since God and humanity are imagined as actors working *within* the same plane of reality. If God is an entity within the universe whose actions come into ‘conflict’ with human agency, then the grammar of the hypostatic union is altered. God and humanity exist alongside each other within Christ – which is a Nestorian conclusion. Such a model also raises problems for divine providence, since the divine and human agencies are understood as mutually restrictive or competitive.

Aseity might alleviate these problems: since God is the transcendent cause of everything, we should not understand God as being in opposition or *other* to reality itself. Because God is not in competition with anything, and is not hindered by material restriction, God remains

¹⁶¹ In speaking this way, I am echoing figures like Maximus the Confessor who spoke of a ‘natural’ and ‘rational’ orientation towards the good, which then is elected (or not) through an exercise of the ‘gnomic’ will. On this, see David Bradshaw, ‘St. Maximus the Confessor on the Will,’ in Maxim Vasiljević (ed.), *Knowing the Purpose of Creation through Resurrection: Proceedings of the Symposium on St. Maximus the Confessor, Belgrade October 18-21, 2012* (University of Belgrade: Sebastian Press, 2013), 143-157.

infinitely close to every creature. Moreover, omnipotence should not be construed as a power *over* or *against*.¹⁶² Instead, God's creative activity is aimed at our flourishing: it is a power *for* us.¹⁶³ God's desire is not opposed to our nature as created beings, but is in accord with our *telos*. And since the Good is identical with Infinite Being, the Good is not a resource which is expended the more it is enacted, but is expanded through communication.¹⁶⁴ In addition other problems are also softened: *creatio ex nihilo* no longer resonates with the imagery of a cosmic overlord who exerts power *over* us, as if this power surrendered us into complete passivity. One could also argue that a non-competitive transcendence ameliorates the aporias of Christological doctrine: if God and creatures are not in competition for ontological 'space', then there is no question of God existing alongside the humanity of Christ.¹⁶⁵ Similar comments can be related to the providential causal-joint, because now it is no longer a question of conflict, but rather an intensification of freedom.

Hopefully what has been said above gives a sense of how the language of 'transcendence' will be used in this study. The above exposition has served to articulate the centrality of this teaching for theological orthodoxy. But there is a query which needs further treatment, namely: what does *tragedy* have to do with *transcendence*? Related to this is the question as to why Christian orthodoxy, in its affirmation of aseity, would create tensions vis-à-vis 'the tragic'? Here we see once more that some of the difficulties that have arisen are connected to modern trends, and are by-no-means necessary developments.

¹⁶² Cf. Jacob Schmutz, 'The Medieval Doctrine of Causality and the Theology of Pure Nature (13th to 17th Century),' in Serge Thomas-Bonino (ed.), *Surnatural: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth-Century Thomistic Thought*, (Florida: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2009), 203–250, who argues that the conflictive model of divine-human agency is linked to a decline of the Neoplatonic notion of *influentia*, and a simultaneous assertion of the doctrine of *concursus*.

¹⁶³ See Rowan Williams' generally excellent 'On Being Creatures,' in *On Christian Theology*, 63–78. He argues that 'creation' is not about an overweening agency, but is precisely creative in the sense that it opens up new possibilities of relation. Since there is nothing prior to creation, except God, the act of bringing-into-being does not exert power *over* anything since there is nothing there which exists 'outside' of God.

¹⁶⁴ Dante's *Purgatorio* XV.49–75 has some wonderful things to say here: 'Because your human longings point to where / portions grow smaller in shared fellowship, / meanness of mind must make bellows sigh. / If love, though, seeking for the utmost sphere, / should ever wrench your longings to the skies, / such fears would have no place within your breast. / For, there, the more that we can speak of "ours", the more each one possesses of the good / and, in that cloister, *caritas* burns brighter...How can it be that good distributed / to many owners makes, in that respect, / each one far richer than if few had shared...The Good that – infinite beyond all words – / is there above will run to love like rays / of light that come to anything that shines. / It gives itself proportioned to the fire, / so that, as far as *caritas* extends, / eternal Worth increases over it. The more there are who fix their minds up there, / the more good love there is – and more to love – / and each (as might a mirror) gives to each.' This translation is taken from Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2012).

¹⁶⁵ See the concise and perceptive treatment of this theme in Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); Aaron Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

3.2. *On Tragedy and Transcendence: On Modern Inversions*

Our definition of transcendence has emphasized the aseity of God and the convertibility of the infinite good with such transcendence. But the question remains: why is this important for our discussion of tragedy and theology? As an initial salvo, we will attempt to sketch three nodes of potential conflict, especially within the modern period: (1) *the aesthetics of the sublime* and *the theory of the tragic*, (2) *the question of history* and transcendence, specifically as it concerns *the historical suffering of the Absolute*, and (3) *the problem of conflicting goods* and its connection to a rejection of *evil-as-privation*.

From its origins, tragedy has been tied to a religious backdrop that projects transcendence (e.g. the gods, necessity, etc.). Attic tragedy was concerned about what could not be mastered or controlled, in other words with the transcendent and the intractable (the Homeric tradition). At the same time, tragedy concerns the instauration of *law* within Athens, which occasioned a transition to critical reflection and legal order (the Solonic tradition). Tragedy tapped into this liminality and period of transition, along with its ambiguities.¹⁶⁶ As a result, ‘this tension [of traditions] that is never totally accepted nor entirely obliterated makes tragedy into a questioning to which there can be no answers. In a tragic perspective man [sic] and human action are seen, not as things that can be defined or described, but as problems. They are presented as riddles whose double meanings can never be pinned down or exhausted’.¹⁶⁷ In other words, tragedy did not uncritically inherit Homeric traditions, nor did legality completely repress the Dionysian. Stephen Halliwell has spoken about how ‘Greek tragedy displays yet confounds, invites yet defies’ those ‘efforts [that search] after [a] secure and coherent understanding’ of ‘the religious concerns and mentality of its characters’.¹⁶⁸ Halliwell writes that ‘The gestures of tragedy’s own people towards unified explanations of their world are reenacted by interpreters seeking to identify and *circumscribe* a stable centre of significance in concepts’, including ideas such as ‘fate, god-sent derangement, inherited ‘guilt’, divine malevolence, the conflict of freedom and necessity, the punishment of *hybris* [sic], or perhaps some final theodicy beyond the realm of suffering’. These concepts do not have finality since ‘tragedy itself often dramatizes the inconclusive value of these and other

¹⁶⁶ ‘...the tragic writers are prone to the use of technical legal terms. But when they use this terminology it is almost always to play on its ambiguities, its vagueness, and its incompleteness. We find terms used imprecisely, shifts of meaning, incoherences and contradictions, which betray internal clashes and tensions at the very heart of a system of legal thought that lacks the elaborated form of that of the Romans. The legal terminology is also used to convey the conflicts that exist between legal values and a more ancient religious tradition, the beginnings of a system of moral thought already distinct from the law although the boundaries between their respective domains are not yet clearly drawn,’ in Jean-Pierre Vernant, ‘Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy’ in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 38.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁶⁸ Halliwell, ‘Human Limits and the Religion of Greek Tragedy’. *Literature & Theology* 4.2 (1990), 170.

religious ideas which find expression in its characters' discourse of reflection and emotion. Moments of human insight in tragedy are rare and precarious; such insight can never certify its penetration into the designs of gods'.¹⁶⁹ Consequently, 'tragic experience is most religious precisely at the points where determinacy and wholeness of explanation prove most elusive'.¹⁷⁰ Such is applicable to actors on the stage, and the audience too, because 'There is no tragic equivalent to the (ostensibly) omniscient voice of the epic narrator'; 'tragedy's religious ideas are mediated through the claims and judgments of those involved in, or close to, the action of the plays'.¹⁷¹ We thus do not have access to the transcendent agencies that inform our choices, but can only engage in speculations of their influence.¹⁷² Such does not mean, however, that characters do not attempt self-transcendence: Oedipus does not remain in ignorance but seeks to know. 'Sophoclean *daimonic* heroes are mortals who cannot but go beyond the mortal human measure into a realm closer to the immortal gods in order to reach whatever tragic knowledge may be available by the journey into that unknown'.¹⁷³ Or to quote Halliwell again: 'the tragic-heroic rises above the level at which human lives are absorbed in the patterns of the natural world or in the routines of social being', reaching thereby to 'the more-than-human'.¹⁷⁴ Tragedy hereby dramatizes the impulse towards disclosure, however disastrous or beneficial such knowledge might be. However, there is no necessity that the outcome of tragedy has to be destructive, since tragedy does not provide certainties of this kind.¹⁷⁵ One could suggest that tragedy most clearly expresses transcendence here, within what we have previously called *the negativity of the tragic*, that intractability which refuses consolatory systems.

Aristotle once said that 'tragedy' reaches towards something more universal than 'history' (*Poetics* 1451b5-b26). But while this philosophical expansion of 'the tragic' is there already from the time of Aristophanes, this universalizing scope of tragedy is particularly stringent with the advent of modernity,¹⁷⁶ especially in the period after the so-called *Querelle des*

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 170.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 172.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 170.

¹⁷² 'Tragic figures possess, or come to, a consciousness that the directions of their lives point to agencies beyond their own knowledge or control. Yet this consciousness grows from, and enlarges, a feeling of the integrity of human experience in its own right' (ibid., 170).

¹⁷³ David Tracy, 'Horror and Horror: The Response of Tragedy'. *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 81.4 (2014): 739-767 (pp. 761-762).

¹⁷⁴ 'Human Limits and the Religion of Greek Tragedy,' 174.

¹⁷⁵ 'The experiences of tragic-heroic men and women appear to defy unwavering belief in divine morality, yet the imagination which endows gods with quasi-human passions and attachments, and pictures them as drawn to involvement in human destinies, is for this very reason unable to suppose that the divine simply transcends the realm of goodness, love, or pity. In its ethical substance, as in its entire vision of the dealings between men and gods, Greek tragedy attains no final certainties—neither the sheer pessimism of a mechanical determinism, nor the consoling pledge of a supreme theodicy' (ibid., 178).

¹⁷⁶ See the studies found in Joshua Billings and Miriam Leonard (eds.), *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Anciens et des Modernes (circa. 1792). The *modern invention of the tragic* was birthed in France and Germany in the seventeenth century. This reflexive turn towards Attic drama was instigated by an intense study of Aristotle's *Poetics* – revived in the Renaissance – and also by the French Revolution which brought to mind the politics of emancipation. 'Tragedy' became a horizon of significance in which 'modernity' achieved self-understanding. Joshua Billings has argued¹⁷⁷ that a duality appears within the criticism of this period: on the one hand, there is a transition towards *historicization* and classical philology, which emphasized the peculiarity of ancient tragedy in comparison with eighteenth-century norms.¹⁷⁸ But on the other hand, 'tragedy' was also subjected to *universalization*, a movement that became epitomised in 'the philosophy of the tragic' (Schelling, Schlegel, Hegel, Hölderlin, Nietzsche, etc.).¹⁷⁹ Initially, this development centred on whether the so-called tragic effect – or Aristotelian catharsis – exhibited trans-historical significance, and became a site of debate regarding the continuity or discontinuity between ancient and modern tragedies. Following this aggrandizing trajectory, 'the tragic' gradually assumes a more metaphysical and ontological stature.

A watershed moment in this reception is the arrival of Kantian aesthetics, especially as regards the emphasis (after Locke) on the *subjective representation* of the beautiful object.¹⁸⁰ But even more pertinent was that Kant – in the wake of Edmund Burke¹⁸¹ – accomplished a deeper separation between the categories of the sublime and the beautiful,¹⁸² a move that issued in a departure from the tradition of Pseudo-Longinus.¹⁸³ This alteration is important for

¹⁷⁷ Joshua Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic: Greek Tragedy and German Philosophy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹⁷⁸ In France, this tendency was exemplified by Rochefort and in Germany by Romantics like Herder.

¹⁷⁹ As Peter Szondi has famously said: 'Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic,' in Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

¹⁸⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (2nd rev. ed., London and New York: Continuum, 1989), 37-49.

¹⁸¹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Rodolphe Gasché, '...And the Beautiful? Revisiting Edmund Burke's "Double Aesthetics",' in Timothy M. Costelloe (ed.), *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 24-36.

¹⁸² Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); 5: 244-278. Also see Paul Guyer, 'Kant's Distinction between the Beautiful and the Sublime', *The Review of Metaphysics* 35.4 (1982): 753-783; Guyer, 'The German Sublime after Kant,' in Timothy M. Costelloe (ed.), *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 102-117 (pp. 103-105); Robert Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 202-285.

¹⁸³ See Longinus, 'On the Sublime,' in Aristotle, Longinus, Demetrius, *Poetics, On the Sublime, On Style*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe and Donald Russell. Loeb Classical Library LCL 199 (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995). Also see Michel Deguy, 'The Discourse of Exaltation (Μεγαληφορειν): Contribution to a Rereading of Pseudo-Longinus,' in Jean-Francois Courtine et al, *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 5-24; Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant*, 27-94; Alain Ségu-

at least two reasons. Firstly, it is salient because the modern concept of the sublime (as mediated via Kant and Schiller) promoted the emergence of a noumenal transcendence. Why this is important will become clearer later in this study. But what is illuminating now is that as an acceptance of the post-Kantian sublime became more widespread, specifically as regards its disconnection from any beautiful order, the idea of ‘transcendence’ becomes unthinkable and unrepresentable, equated with what cannot be cognized or communicated (e.g. Lacoue-Labarthe, Lyotard, Nancy, etc.).¹⁸⁴ This tendency (as we will see) remains incompatible with an account of metaphysical analogy, which proposes an ontological and axiological participation of the finite within the infinite.¹⁸⁵ It also connects to a related question to be addressed later, namely whether there are varieties of tragic suffering and pain that are finally unthinkable and unspeakable. Can we bring pain into speech, or are we relegated to absolute silence?

Secondly, this shift affected readings of ‘the tragic’ itself, which were now conceptualized through a post-Enlightenment sense of the autonomy of the subject. These tendencies were stimulated through the political changes in France as well as Cartesian philosophy. Under this inspiration, Kant and Schiller’s deployment of a *mathematical* and *dynamical* sublime helped to solidify the *modern* opposition between freedom and necessity. For Kant (and Schiller), the mathematical sublime concerns experiences of magnitude, as when the mind is unable to grasp the manifold. This in turn inspires the powers of reason to imagine a totality that would encompass this immensity. The dynamical sublime refers to those feelings of being overpowered and deprived of one’s capacity to act. For Kant, this disenfranchisement of the will agitates the subject to assert itself over-against the power which countervails against them. This post-Critical opposition between freedom and determinism is paralleled with the noumenal and phenomenal distinction: even though the subject is submitted to biological and

Duclot, ‘Généalogie du sublime: Le Περὶ ὕψους du Pseudo-Longin : une tentative de synthèse entre Platon et Aristote’. *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 88.4 (2004): 649-672.

¹⁸⁴ Or to be more precise, the sublime becomes ‘the presentation of non-presentation’ (Lacoue-Labarthe) or ‘the presentation of presentation itself’ (Nancy). Besides Kant, Heideggerian notions of Being-a-*Ereignis* and Being-a-*Anwesen* certainly lie in the background here. For postmodern accounts of the sublime, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 78-88; 89-107; Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘The Sublime Offering,’ in Jean-François Courtine et al, *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 25-53; Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, ‘Sublime Truth (Part 1)’. *Cultural Critique* No. 18 (1991): 5-31 and Lacoue-Labarthe, ‘Sublime Truth (Part 2)’. *Cultural Critique* No. 20 (1991-1992): 207-229. For a summary of these debates more generally, see David B. Johnson, ‘The Postmodern Sublime: Presentation and its Limits,’ in Timothy M. Costelloe (ed.), *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 118-131. For a critique, see Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 88-100 and Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2007), 109-138.

¹⁸⁵ John Milbank, ‘Sublimity: The Modern Transcendent,’ in Regina Schwartz (ed.), *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 211-234.

historical necessity in the world of appearances, within the noumenal sphere one remains transcendently free. The Kantian schema was eventually taken up within Schiller's criticism, and thereafter dispersed into classical scholarship.¹⁸⁶ Such a tradition continues until recent times within the writings of Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, and Slavoj Žižek.¹⁸⁷

Overall what is important to register is that after the Kantian moment 'the tragic' receives a greater speculative adornment, even reaching to theological vantages.¹⁸⁸ In the philosophies of Schelling and Hölderlin,¹⁸⁹ the idea of 'the speculative tragic' comes to project an Ultimate Reality (or Absolute) that is subjected to contradiction, scission and suffering.¹⁹⁰ On this reading 'all gods and every God, including the God of faith and the Spirit of absolute knowing, is subject to the same ambiguity and is on the same bumpy ride as the rest of us. Suffering is written into the script. Languishing is of the essence'.¹⁹¹ Adopting Heideggerian language, one could say that 'the speculative tragic' implies an *ontotheology of suffering*: for Schelling and Hölderlin, the One is not self-identical or simple but ruptured and traumatized, always-already from the ages of the world. There is no escape from suffering and tragic haemorrhaging – even the Absolute is having a rather rough time.

What should be brought to attention is that this speculative trajectory is present in modern dogmatics also. Jürgen Moltmann is exemplary, as can be seen in his stridency against divine impassibility, as most famously expounded in *The Crucified God*.¹⁹² This monograph has few explicit references to tragedy as such,¹⁹³ but the overall thematic of transcendental dereliction

¹⁸⁶ Several of Schiller's texts on tragedy can be found in Schiller, Friedrich. *Sämtliche Werke*. Band 5 (München: Hanser, 1962). On Schiller's reception of the Kantian sublime, and its impact on his understanding of the tragic, see Frederick Beiser, *Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-examination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); 238-262; Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic*, 75-104; Michelle Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 243-267; Samuel Hughes, 'Schiller on the Pleasure of Tragedy'. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55.4 (2015): 417-432; Ritchie Robertson, 'On the Sublime and Schiller's Theory of Tragedy'. *Philosophical Readings* 5 (2013): 194-212.

¹⁸⁷ Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁸⁸ On tragedy and the birth of 'the speculative', see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'The Caesura of the Speculative,' in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, (ed.) Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 208-235.

¹⁸⁹ For more on Schelling and Hölderlin, see Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic*, 80-88; 123-132; 133-158; 189-221; Jean-François Courtine, 'Tragedy and Sublimity: The Speculative Interpretation of Oedipus Rex on the Threshold of German Idealism,' in Jean-François Courtine et al, *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 157-176; Courtine, 'Of Tragic Metaphor,' in. Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks (eds.), *Philosophy and Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 2000), 57-75; Ian Balfour, 'Paradoxen: On the Sublimity of Tragedy in Hölderlin and Some Contemporaries,' in Joshua Billings and Miriam Leonard (eds.), *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 59-87.

¹⁹⁰ David Farrell Krell, *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005).

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁹² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1974).

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 221-22; 267-268; 303-307.

and ‘godlessness’ certainly places Moltmann within a Schellingesque trajectory.¹⁹⁴ In *God in Creation*, there are references to the tragic quality of a creation that is subject to ‘futility’.¹⁹⁵ Elsewhere, he also makes mention of tragedy in reference to Miguel de Unamuno while discussing the mystical idea of ‘the sorrow of God’ (*congoja*).¹⁹⁶ However, Moltmann’s most affirmative statement on ‘the tragic’ is in relation to the Russian mystical philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev.¹⁹⁷ Moltmann endorses the conjecture of a ‘tragedy in God’ in which God struggles for freedom within time, so that ‘the tragedy of human history is God’s own tragedy too’.¹⁹⁸ This sublimation of the tragic into the Godhead has shades of speculative idealism, and carries with the conceptual tensions we have mentioned already apropos divine passibility.¹⁹⁹ What can be gleaned from this example is that a revisionist reading of divine transcendence does make the inclusion of divine tragedy or suffering conceptually ‘easier’. Contrariwise, it appears that a more traditional account of aseity creates more difficulties, that is, if we wish to address tragedy within a classically-oriented theology. However, it also proposes that these tensions might have been exacerbated by a *modern* genealogy of the tragic that incorporates the post-Kantian sublime, and an absolutization of suffering found within

¹⁹⁴ Larry Bouchard places Moltmann’s theology of the cross within the *agon* of a ‘negative dialectic’ (Adorno), which is Bouchard’s own rubric for tragic experience; cf. Bouchard, *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology: Evil in Cotemporary Drama and Religious Thought* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 229-234; 250-251.

¹⁹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation – The Gifford Lectures 1984-1985*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1985), 68.

¹⁹⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1981), 36-42.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42-47.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁹⁹ I will not rehash my arguments once more, but will rather give a quotation from Moltmann’s contemporary, and fellow political theologian, Johann Baptist Metz. Concerning the theological popularity of divine passibility, and its account of atonement, Metz has the following to say: ‘Is not a reconciliation with God at work here that is too speculative, too proximate to Gnosis, achieved too much behind the back of the human history of suffering? Is there not also and especially for theologians that negative mystery of human suffering which will not allow itself to be made sense of in anyone’s name? How is discourse on the suffering God not just a sublime duplication of human suffering and human powerlessness? And from another direction: How is language about a solidaristic God who suffers with us not just a projective duplication, under the anonymous pressure of a socially prevalent ideal of solidarity (just as earlier, in feudal societies, God was represented as the unapproachable king and lord)? In any event, is not the classical doctrine of analogy (concerning the *maior dissimilitudo* that holds between God and world) violated? How can the language of the suffering God, or of suffering between God and God, avoid leading to an eternalization of suffering? Do not here God and human being end up under the weight of a quasi-mythical universalization of suffering, which finally overcomes even the impulse that resists injustice? Or perhaps in this language of the suffering there is too much of Hegel, too much sublation of the negativity of suffering into the conceptually comprehended self-movement of absolute spirit and, therefore, too much reduction of suffering to its concept? In this language of the suffering God, does not something like a secret aestheticization of all suffering secretly come into play? Suffering, which makes us cry out or finally fall wretchedly silent, knows no majesty. It is nothing great, nothing sublime; at root it is something entirely different from a powerful, solidaristic suffering-with [*Mitleiden*]. It is not simply a sign of love; rather, it is much more a horrifying sign of no longer being able to love. It is that suffering which leads into nothingness if it is not a suffering unto God’. This quotation can be found in Johann Baptist Metz, ‘Suffering unto God’. *Critical Inquiry* 20.4 (1994): 611-622 (p. 619).

German Idealism. Nonetheless, simply asserting this genealogical connection does not resolve the problem which has been raised within modernity, namely that of *historicity*. A question is therefore presented: how is one to relate historicity and classical metaphysics if historicity remains an indubitable aspect of tragic experience?

Another contention of classical metaphysics is the assertion of an ontological primacy of the good over evil. Since Plato and Augustine, the so-called *privatio boni* has claimed that ‘evil’ does not have its own ‘existence’ or ‘being’ but is traceable to a perversion of the good. However, in recent times this doctrine has been found wanting by some, especially by theorists who lean towards Kantian ideas of ‘radical evil’, and also by those who in the wake of twentieth century totalitarianisms and exterminations consider it to be inadequate. Against Plato and Augustine, Kant connects the ethical not to the natural desire for the transcendent good, but to the self-legislating law that establishes non-heteronomous moral criteria. But as Milbank has argued,²⁰⁰ Kantianism proposes a pure formality of law that has no intrinsic orientation to good or evil. Rather, as a kind of pre-actualized possibility, ‘freedom’ is that catalyst which enacts the distinguishability between good and evil as such; and because of this, ‘freedom’ persists within a hazy and un-decidable sublimity that is disconnected from natural determination or teleology, since ‘freedom’ cannot be phenomenologically deduced or constrained by sensibility. For Kant, the criteria for discerning a perverted will from a good will can only be adjudicated in relation to its commitment to duty, specifically as it counteracts the self-interests of individuals. But problems arise at this juncture: since we cannot ever be certain that we are acting out of ethical duty or self-interest at any particular moment, we can only prove adherence by consciously acting *against* our self-interest – which is why Kant favours heroic sacrifice as the paramount demonstration of freedom.²⁰¹ Moreover, since there is no deeper connection between goodness and the will, and evil as such is accorded co-priority with the good, evil could just as well be counted as a veracious expression of ‘being’, since both are equally truthful accounts of reality. Once more, ‘being-as-such’ becomes equipoised between goodness and evil and maybe even persists beyond this opposition altogether in an unfathomable abyss – as seen in Schelling’s metaphysics of a divinity that pre-exists both goodness and evil.

This analysis gains relevance for our discussion of the tragic as we consider the work of Kathleen Sands, who attempts to affirm tragic theology at the expense of privation theory.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 1-25.

²⁰¹ It is for this reason that Kant – particularly after Lacan’s seminal essay – has been associated with Sade. See Jacques Lacan, ‘Kant with Sade,’ in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink et al (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 645-668.

²⁰² Kathleen M. Sands, *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). Also see Sands, ‘Tragedy, Theology, and Feminism in the Time after Time’. *New Literary History* 35.1 (2004): 41-61. Sand’s arguments have been repeated in Flora A.

Sands will be discussed again in Chapter 7, but for now it is worth tracing the outlines of her argument to illuminate their present connections. Sands's contribution to tragic theory is found in her disavowal of any idea of a transcendent and metaphysical 'Good', specifically as bequeathed through the Augustinian tradition. For her this is reducible to 'moral dualism',²⁰³ an assertion of a 'good' separated from the entanglements of time and tragedy. For Sands, there is no ethical action that is devoid of the potential for tragic consequences, and therefore all moral reasoning has to take into account the temporal and interconnected quality of every action. We cannot transcendently extract the good from the bad; and any attempt to do so simply succumbs to the Manichaean temptation to divide and exclude. Alternatively, 'the good' (with a small 'g') should be explicated as radically contingent and non-metaphysical, as an 'immanent good' rather than a 'transcendent' one.²⁰⁴ This requires us (and especially women) to acknowledge 'the absence of a limitless and transcendent good', and 'take responsibility for sin and grace into [our] own hands'.²⁰⁵ At this juncture, Sands works with an either-or logic: either you accept tragedy, and acknowledge the finality of non-compossible goods, or you reject tragedy for the sake of Augustinian dogmas. You cannot have it both ways.

On this point, Sands's contributions certainly deserve to be taken seriously, even if they probably present a rather skewed reading of Augustine (as we will see later). Moreover, she is not alone: George Steiner has argued that 'absolute tragedy' rejects any Platonic-Augustinian metaphysics. In his words, it proposes a 'heretical' vision of the world, since 'absolute tragedy' imagines that there is an 'innate evil' within things, a 'manichean dialectic', and that the tragic is best exemplified within a '*performative mode of despair*'.²⁰⁶ On this point, Steiner is profoundly deferential to the traumas of post-war Jewishness, and a philosophical pessimism traceable to Schopenhauer.²⁰⁷ But what these assertions raise, once more, is whether the question of transcendence (and specifically the ontological priority of the Good) might come into potential conflict with an affirmation of the tragic. If you are willing to accept the one, can you accept the other as well? But it also suggests a possibility that some of the supposed tensions between Christianity and 'the tragic' have a more recent origin, and are traceable to post-Holocaust affinities for 'radical evil', and maybe not 'the tragic' as such.

Keshgegian, *Time for Hope: Practices for Living in Today's World* (New York-London: Continuum, 2006), 96-127.

²⁰³ *Escape from Paradise*, 17-36.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 43-54.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁰⁶ George Steiner, 'A Note on Absolute Tragedy'. *Journal of Literature & Theology* 4.2 (1990): 147-156 (p. 155).

²⁰⁷ John C. McDowell, 'Silenus' Wisdom and the 'Crime Of Being': The Problem of Hope in George Steiner's Tragic Vision'. *Literature & Theology* 14.4. (2000): 385-398.

At this stage, some of these questions are left open-ended, since a larger argument is needed to address them. But what can be said now is that there are central affirmations of Christian orthodoxy – such as divine aseity, analogy and the primacy of the Good – that *could* present issues for an incorporation of tragedy, especially after its contemporary reconfigurations. Whether or not these tensions can be addressed is the exploration of this study. So in order to adjudicate this, we have decided to examine Donald MacKinnon, and those critically engaged with him, since the tensions discussed hitherto play themselves out in his *oeuvre*, and in the sceptical commentary they have occasioned. Crucial for MacKinnon are the relation between the tragic and transcendence; more than any other theologian or moralist in contemporary times, he emphasised the importance of tragedy for Christian theology. And so in the following chapter, we will introduce MacKinnon, putting forward the general outlines of his theology and method, as well as the criticisms of him crystalized in writings of David Bentley Hart and John Milbank. The chapters that come thereafter should be read as a response that is shaped by this critical reception.

In this chapter, gave an outline of the classical teaching regarding transcendence and aseity. We then suggested that this teaching sits in tension with some tenets of the modern idea of the tragic, and in particular its connections to *the Kantian sublime, a suffering absolute and a rejection of evil-as-privation*. In the following chapter, and those to follow, we will see how these questions re-appear within a modern theological debate between Hart, MacKinnon and Milbank. It is to these interactions that we now turn.

Chapter 4

Donald MacKinnon I: On Critical Antiphony

This chapter constitutes our initial foray into the work of Donald MacKinnon. It attempts to interpret his basic theological posture, and how this impacts our structure of argumentation. After delineating a skeletal outline of his theological output, it will attempt a detailed reading of his most stringent critics. This moment is profoundly important for such a study, since it is these dissensions that will serve as a catalyst for the following chapters, as they attempt a response to such questions. As will be seen, such a response will be constituted by a mixture of confirmation, qualification, and contestation.

4.1. On Donald MacKinnon and the Question of Difficulty

There is a sense in which Donald MacKinnon's scholarly testament defies simple description or reduction,²⁰⁸ but if one could hazard a workable dilution it would be less a single dogma (philosophical, theological or otherwise) than a certain transparency to 'difficulty'. It has been commented upon that MacKinnon's style resists systematic formulation: 'His was a trust in the fragment, in the incomplete torso, in that which sprang resoundingly and at risk from provocations, the calling occasioned by the immediate moment or setting'. So says George Steiner, a close friend and colleague (who dedicated his *On Difficulty and Other Essays* to Donald and Lois MacKinnon).²⁰⁹ Such should not be understood to mean that MacKinnon had a piecemeal or dilettantish approach. Instead, one should read this tendency as part of his

²⁰⁸ Brian Hebblethwaite writes of MacKinnon that 'it is virtually impossible to summarize his views. He founded no school. His colleagues and pupils simply learned from him how to ponder and probe a whole range of metaphysical, theological, and ethical issues relentlessly, without evasion, and in depth'. This quote is found in Brian Hebblethwaite, 'Donald MacKinnon (1913–94),' in Ian Markham (ed.), *The Student's Companion to the Theologians* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 454–457 (p. 455). Also cf. Kenneth Surin, 'Donald MacKinnon,' in Kenneth Surin (ed.), *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), ix–xi. On p. ix he says the following: 'MacKinnon's work is characterized by a vast erudition, and his mode of thought is profoundly interrogative (rather than affirmative). In theological matters, he refuses to take up substantive positions, and prefers instead to 'map' the ramifications of the espousal of such positions. This task is invariably undertaken with great subtlety and a deep respect for the complexities of the subject matter treated. The reader is always left with the impression that what matters for MacKinnon is precisely what is left unsaid, though, typically, this too is somehow indicated in his texts. A thinker who prefers to create an agenda (as opposed to dealing with one that has been pre-set), to articulate problems (as opposed to resolving them), to use speech to register (rather than to subdue) the complexity of 'realia', is very likely to produce a body of work that demands further exploration and elaboration.'

²⁰⁹ George Steiner, 'Tribute to Donald MacKinnon.' *Theology* 98 781 (1995): 2–9 (p. 5).

commitment to an intellectual integrity that refused to trivialize phenomena, especially those rebarbative aspects that defy cheap circumscription (e.g. evil, the tragic).²¹⁰ Accordingly, the prose of MacKinnon's argumentation displays a 'tortuous thoroughness'²¹¹ rather than an air-tight systematic flourish. These sentiments have been echoed by Paul Murray, who describes his method as 'a rigorously self-critical fallibilism'.²¹² This posture stems from his distaste for easy answers when complex questions are implied, and his resistance to the idea that the world is beholden to epistemic closure or attempts at 'finalization' – hence the language of 'difficulty'.

What is meant by 'difficulty'? In an essay polarized on what she calls 'the difficulty of reality',²¹³ Cora Diamond defines this as 'experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or to be painful in its inexplicability',²¹⁴ or as 'the apparent resistance by reality to one's ordinary modes of life, including one's ordinary modes of thinking.' She goes on to say that 'to appreciate the difficulty is to feel oneself being shouldered out of how one thinks, or how one is supposed to think, or to have a sense of the inability of thought to encompass what it is attempting to reach'.²¹⁵ The avoidance of such difficult knowledge is described by Diamond as 'deflection', as a failure to imaginatively inhabit 'bodies', resulting in them being treated as 'mere facts' without moral relevance.²¹⁶ Such knowledge is overwhelming, and without imaginatively inhabiting such 'exposure' (in which we recognize it as '*our* exposure...in a shuddering experience of death and life held together'²¹⁷), we risk closing in upon ourselves, failing to yield to what we know (as Stanley Cavell said of Shakespeare's Othello²¹⁸). However, Diamond is perceptive enough to realize that 'difficulty' does not only apply to our experiences of alienation and suffering, or what Stephen Mulhall calls 'disvaluation'.²¹⁹ She also makes reference to the experiences we have of beauty and order within a backdrop of inhumanity. She pays tribute the idea that

²¹⁰ Cf. Rowan Williams, 'Obituary: Donald MacKinnon,' *The Tablet* (March 12, 1994): 31-32.

²¹¹ D. M. MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory* (New York: Collier Books, 1957), 197. These are MacKinnon's own words that he used to describe the style of Joseph Butler (a moralist for whom he had great esteem), but they are apposite regarding MacKinnon himself as well.

²¹² Paul D. Murray, 'Theology in the Borderlands: Donald Mackinnon and Contemporary Theology'. *Modern Theology* 14.3 (1998): 355-376 (p. 368).

²¹³ Cora Diamond, 'The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,' in Stanley Cavell et al, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 43-89. For some commentary on this essay, see Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 65-94. Hauerwas has done some theological commentary on these texts, which can be found in Stanley Hauerwas, 'Bearing Reality: A Christian Meditation'. *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33.1 (2013): 3-20.

²¹⁴ 'The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,' 45-46.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

²¹⁸ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 141.

²¹⁹ Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal*, 87.

miraculous occurrences can shock us into new modes of being and perception.²²⁰ She quotes the poet Czesław Miłosz, who once said that beauty ‘should not exist’.²²¹ Diamond’s point is that if suffering produces a problem for easy description, then the appearance of goodness does so too. And as Mulhall has said elsewhere: ‘Some difficulties in reality...are *not* ones we would wish to wish away’ [*italics mine*].²²²

The above statements help us with our heuristic definition of ‘difficulty’. But at this stage it remains open whether MacKinnon is able to account for both sides of this problematic with equal dedication, especially as regards ‘the problem of evil’ and what could be called ‘the problem of the good’. A surface reading of MacKinnon’s overwhelming preoccupation with evil might lead one to think that this habit approached the level of the obsessive. The reasons for this temperament are surely manifold. Biographical factors are of course determinative,²²³ but they are not my main concern here. I have already mentioned MacKinnon’s concern for intellectual ‘integrity’, but one could say also that such integrity is predicated on a preference for ‘realist’ and ‘pluralist’ accounts of philosophy, against British currents of idealism and monism. MacKinnon’s ‘realism’ does not finally exclude creative receptivity, but he remained strenuous in asserting the priority of ‘discovery’ over ‘construction’, and rejected any pre-eminence of ideation over the truthful disclosure of reality.²²⁴ Such ‘particularist’ and ‘realist’ leanings are confirmed by his friends and students (e.g. George Steiner²²⁵ and Nicholas Lash²²⁶), and can be seen in interactions with his dialogue-partners, from R.G. Collingwood to more *avant garde* figures like Vladimir Lenin and Teilhard de Chardin – much to the irritation of some who knew him.²²⁷ MacKinnon was concerned throughout his career with ‘the true service of the particular’,²²⁸ which (while not rejecting larger metaphysical placement) sought to attend faithfully, and truthfully, to the exigencies that form the substance of the moral life. Particularly poignant was the reality of suffering, as well as the stubborn presence of the tragic in human affairs. But while he was ‘deeply fascinated by pain’ (in the words of George Steiner²²⁹) he was rarely sentimental in his judgements, and rejected vague invocations of ‘the tragic sense of life’ as a hindrance to critical thinking and

²²⁰ Diamond, ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,’ 60-64.

²²¹ The phrase is taken from a poem entitled ‘One More Day’.

²²² Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal*, 88.

²²³ The ongoing work of André Müller deserves attention in this regard.

²²⁴ A précis of MacKinnon’s position can be found in ‘Further Reflections,’ in D. M. MacKinnon and G. W. H. Lampe, *The Resurrection: A Dialogue Arising from Broadcasts by G. W. H. Lampe and D. M. MacKinnon*, (ed.) William Purcell (London: Mowbray, 1966).

²²⁵ Cf. Steiner, ‘Tribute to Donald MacKinnon,’ 2.

²²⁶ Cf. Nicholas Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), 4.

²²⁷ See Fergus Kerr, ‘Comment: Remembering Donald MacKinnon’. *New Blackfriars* 85.997 (2004): 265-269.

²²⁸ This phrase is taken from MacKinnon, ‘Evil and Personal Responsibility’. *The Listener* 39 (18 March 1948): 457-59.

²²⁹ Steiner, ‘Tribute to Donald MacKinnon,’ 2.

ethical mobilization. Nonetheless he performed a kind of ‘painful apostolate’²³⁰ in which he, through the very contortedness of his witness, sought ‘to enact certain recognitions’.²³¹ His character and prose can be read performatively, indicating a transparency to the many-sidedness of ‘the real’, as demonstrated in a multitude of styles and sources that are commandeered to bolster his persuasive enterprise. Certainly, MacKinnon’s agonizing in this area can seem to be too stringent, a bit too non-conciliatory. Cornelius Ernst once remarked (in a review of MacKinnon) upon ‘an indulgence in ‘problems’ for their own sake, a sense that one’s moral being is somehow heightened by the mere fact of having become problematic’.²³² Similar criticisms are echoed by other interpreters of MacKinnon, including John Milbank whose reading we shall elaborate in due course. But with this in mind, one could phrase the tension so: is MacKinnon’s peculiar agony merely an indulgent revelry in ‘the beastliness of things’,²³³ or is it a meditation on Christ’s vigil at Gethsemane, as it was poised between a trust in divine response and the dark epiphany of human betrayal?²³⁴ It is to such questions, and the adequacy of MacKinnon’s answers, that we shall turn in the following chapters.

The awareness of ‘difficulty’, and his non-systematic or fragmented style, leaves one with the problem of beginnings.²³⁵ His preoccupation with the ‘difficult’ and ‘the particular’ does

²³⁰ The phrase is taken from an essay on Kierkegaard by MacKinnon in *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays*, (eds.) George W. Roberts and Donovan E. Smucker (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011 [1968]), 125.

²³¹ Kenneth Surin, ‘Some Aspects of the ‘Grammar’ of ‘Incarnation’ and ‘Kenosis’: Reflections Prompted by the Writings of Donald Mackinnon,’ in *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy*, 96. Cf. *ibid.*, 109n.15 for some discussion of this point.

²³² Cornelius Ernst, ‘Ethics and the Play of Intelligence’. *New Blackfriars* 39.460-461 (1958), 326. It should be said that such a risk was already acknowledged by MacKinnon. On this, see MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 234-235. He also spoke against a certain ‘intellectual masochism’ whereby the theologian ‘shows himself ready to assent to arguments simply because they seem to make faith harder for him [sic]’ (‘MacKinnon, ‘Philosophy and Christology,’ in *Borderlands of Theology*, 66).

²³³ MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 242.

²³⁴ Kerr, ‘Remembering Donald MacKinnon,’ 269.

²³⁵ Timothy Connor has written, in a different context, of the risks involved in interpreting MacKinnon’s thought. He has said that ‘Any attempt to anchor the exposition of [his thought] in what MacKinnon actually wrote inevitably runs the risk of untangling in ploddingly exegetical fashion the complex skein of his thought and flattening out the often turbulent form in which it is expressed. In addition, a thinker whose theological work is so markedly occasional and allusive and set so angularly and tersely against the backdrop of several argumentatively-rich and exegetically-thick theological and philosophical *oeuvres* is difficult to summarize. Moreover, MacKinnon invites interpretation as a disciple of one or more major figures, particularly Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar in theology and Joseph Butler and Immanuel Kant in moral philosophy. Yet the attempt to trace tributaries of influence which themselves interweave and overlap leads all too often to a vast penumbra of thought whose thematic range and density MacKinnon only rarely exposed to detailed critical exposition. Only the most selective reading could ever locate him as a Barthian or Kantian *tout simple*. Further, it must be said that if polemic rarely serves clarity of expression, in MacKinnon’s case it leads in specific texts to one-sided overstatements of positions which are often mollified in related writings of the same period. If concern for balanced representation of his thought has led us to develop a synthetic account of strands of argument from across a wide variety of his works, care has been taken not to present MacKinnon’s thought as tidier or more settled than it actually is’. This quotation is found in Timothy

create some problems for formulating a straightforward method of interpretation. By and large, his proclivity was for the essay, rather than the extended dilations of a monograph. However, there are two exceptions: *A Study in Ethical Theory* (1957) and *The Problem of Metaphysics* (1974). Both studies are important, since they provide a larger canvass for presentation, and in some sense bring together many of the scattered expostulations found in his essays and shorter writings. Our preference, however, leans towards *The Problem of Metaphysics*, for the following reasons: (1) it was MacKinnon's last monograph and therefore provides a better vantage for reading his mature thought. (2) *A Study in Ethical Theory* leans, though not absolutely, towards being a historical account of other thinkers (Bentham, Butler, Kant, Hegel), and therefore should not be given the same status as his more constructive ventures. And lastly, (3) the later text addresses more explicitly the themes of tragedy and metaphysics, and therefore is deemed to be more pertinent for our present task. It is for these reasons that I have decided to focus in detail on this later text, which will provide not only a window into MacKinnon's mature thinking, but will also give a framework in which to order our presentation of a thinker who seems to resist such tidiness.

However before we discuss this specific monograph in detail, it seems necessary to place its exegesis within the context of its reception. And so it is important at this stage to step back to clarify the context of my argument. My aim here is directed towards interpreting MacKinnon's approach to the question of metaphysical transcendence, and its connection to the tragic. What should be salient though is that I am trying to read MacKinnon in light of the most important criticisms of his work; inevitably, this means that the argument is slanted towards the questions raised by such criticisms. The two figures who will be engaged are David Bentley Hart and John Milbank. Both of these thinkers are critical of his work, but they also have criticisms that reach beyond MacKinnon himself and address larger questions. So their criticisms should be seen in the developing argument as a whole, and not just in the current chapter. This is because they have views that evince pertinence on larger questions which are the concern of this study, namely, that of tragedy and a classical rendition of Christian metaphysics. They reach beyond MacKinnon and deserve a wider engagement than can be contained in this chapter alone. This means that, throughout the argument, I will be glancing backwards towards the criticisms expounded here, with the hope of addressing some of the lingering concerns which may remain. This implies that my consideration of their arguments is taken in stages, some of which extend beyond the present chapter. One result of this methodological choice is that in order to present my take on MacKinnon's work, it seems that I am obliged to present the arguments of MacKinnon's interlocutors *before* I represent his own positions on this question in detail. Such an ordering will provide clarity and direction

G. Connor, *From Galilee to Jerusalem to Galilee: The Kenotic Trajectory of the Church in Donald Mackinnon's Theology* (Ph.D: Toronto: The University of Toronto, 2003), 13-14.

regarding the emphases and turns in my argument. And since an appreciation or criticism of their interpretations of MacKinnon can only be properly evaluated once the evidence is laid out, there will be periodic repetitions of their readings when an informed rebuttal or confirmation of their views can be encountered.

We will turn to these views shortly, however one more thing needs discussion: since Hart and Milbank assume some knowledge of MacKinnon's work, I will briefly (and inadequately) give a summary of his intellectual tendencies. Overall, one could say that MacKinnon's proclivity was towards a moral realism²³⁶ that sought to place human agency within a resolutely attentive mode of awareness. He sought to place a priority on the fact that our knowledge of the world, while having an undeniably constructive element, was nonetheless fundamentally premised on an openness to objective reality, to the fact that we first *discover* before we *create*. Our being is placed within an ontological receptivity that defines us as human beings, that is, having a sense of being generated out of something that exceeds selfhood. We are not self-created, and therefore because we are limited beings, it follows that we are dependent on a reality that exceeds immediate grasp. Coming to an awareness of this condition is essential if we want to enter our creatureliness. And to say that we are 'created' means, additionally, that we exist within *time*, that we are *historical* beings who are subject to an irreversible flow of development. Our agency is placed within this context, which necessitates that actions also take place within limitations that constrain all forms of human activity. It is for this reason that MacKinnon has a particular affinity for Kant's metaphysics, since it sought to place limits upon the mind's capacity for transcendent knowledge. Our knowledge is 'transcendental' in the sense that it remains limited by the incapacity to know things-in-themselves. It also explains MacKinnon's perennial adherence to Joseph Butler's ethical vision, which treated the question of morality within a persistent focus on the particularity of human nature. For MacKinnon, it is the attempt to usurp this limitation that constitutes our drift towards sinfulness, because by doing so we deny our ineradicably time-bound nature.

This concern for limitation and finitude also explains MacKinnon's preference for *the particular*, as seen in his rejection of idealism for a critical realism. For MacKinnon, rather than imposing alien structures upon reality, one must patiently and creatively allow the *realia* to manifest themselves rather than pre-empting their disclosure. This does not however imply sheer passivity, but necessitates that one cultivate certain habits of perception that will assist one in recognizing and discerning the truth when it manifests itself. Much like an artist or poet – MacKinnon uses the example of Paul Cézanne – one needs to hone a set of material capacities in order to allow the work to speak, for it to take on a life of its own in a way that

²³⁶ See Andrew Bowyer, *To Perceive Tragedy Without the Loss of Hope': Donald MacKinnon's Moral Realism* (Ph.D., The University of Edinburgh, 2016).

exceeds the objective willing of the persona. Thus one must allow the particularity of things to show themselves, rather than imposing a pattern which misrepresents them. It is for this cause that MacKinnon rallies against any philosophical *monism* that collapses the individual into an all-embracing totality. Here the influence of G. E. Moore is decisive, especially as regards his rejection of F. H. Bradley's account of 'internal relations'. This is intrinsically connected to MacKinnon's realism, since the drive to establish 'a whole' once more implicates the philosopher in the conceits of idealism, in an attempt to impose a totalizing pattern upon the intractable diversity of the world. This is why MacKinnon's metaphysics is best described as a form of *pluralistic realism*.²³⁷

All of these factors help to explain MacKinnon's penchant for tragic motifs, and is especially enlightening as regards his rejection of religious theodicy. Tragedy is about the denial of easy answers and quick fixes: its vision is one of human beings existing in a world of unforeseen consequences. Our actions create effects that exceed our control, and sometimes imply innocent suffering that defies any just rationale. Thus any attempt to explain away or curtail suffering implies a denial of reality. This is why MacKinnon has little patience for theodicies that seek to impose patterns and meaning upon narratives of suffering, since this drive to justify suffering, in the words of Rowan Williams, is ultimately 'an attempt to forget it as suffering, and so a quest for untruthfulness'.²³⁸ MacKinnon is thus opposed to any metaphysics that seeks to plot tragedy within a larger order of justification. But MacKinnon is also radically opposed to a metaphysical relativism that denies meaning altogether. Without values, such as the dignity of human freedom, the substance of tragedy becomes altered beyond recognition, since without a non-trivial form of valuation, one could not say *why* tragedy and loss is so violating, why it is so *difficult*. It is for this reason that MacKinnon can speak of 'the transcendence of the tragic' as a metaphysics, while also being a kind of anti-metaphysics as well. One cannot impose any confident order upon the rebarbative nature of the tragic, but one also cannot deny transcendent order altogether, because without it 'tragedy' itself would cease to be a problem. For MacKinnon then, this interplay remains a continuing issue for metaphysicians, unless one tries to avoid 'tragedy' altogether.

One hopes that the last few paragraphs have given us an adequate sense of the general trend of MacKinnon's philosophy. Such will assist us then as we engage with the critiques lodged at it – a subject which will occupy us for the remainder of this chapter.

²³⁷ Cf. Donald MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 32.

²³⁸ Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology,' in *On Christian Theology*, 155.

4.2. David Bentley Hart: *The Tragic as Sacrificial Economy and Metaphysical Consolation*

Any cursory reading of Hart's magnum opus will encounter its profuse conviction and alienating volubility.²³⁹ Such rhetoric is deliberate since Hart is not content to demurely hand over the socio-cultural realm to a 'neutral' and secularizing discourse. For him, any supposed 'neutrality' is already to have capitulated to a particular 'telling' of the human story, and so is a thoroughly 'ideological' gambit. Taking cues from John Milbank, he would argue that such a tale is a historically-constructed and contingent interpretation of the world, and therefore not insuperable or inevitable. This sentiment betrays a significant awareness of 'postmodern' accounts of how language and narrative structure our reality, and also underlies his concern for a 'rhetorical' turn in relation to the communication of Christian truth.²⁴⁰ This theological conviction makes his treatise a kind of anti-Nietzschean manifesto, an unashamed affirmation of the infinitude of beauty.

Hart's treatment of this topic occurs in the section entitled 'The Consolations of Tragedy, the Terrors of Easter' (373-394).²⁴¹ The overarching concern of his argument is to distinguish between two orders of 'beauty', namely that of Christ's self-donation, and, contrastively, the supposed harmony of Attic tragedy. For Hart, these constitute two different and 'opposed' aesthetic visions of the world, since the perspective of Greek tragedy belongs to '[t]he sacrificial regime of the totality' as well as an 'economy of violence' in which human sacrifice is given 'aesthetic necessity' and 'moral symmetry' (373). This constitutes Hart's initial criticism of interpreting the gospel through the lens of tragedy. The second one is that the tragic vision, in Hart's opinion, fails 'to take suffering seriously enough' (373), and serves as a 'consolation' that is unable to really account for the gravity of evil and suffering. Both of these criticisms underlie Hart's rejection of any kind of 'tragic theology'. For him 'every tragic wisdom is in fact far too comforting to grasp what has occurred in Christ', and 'it can scarcely, at the last, inspire any ethos but one that hovers disquietingly between resignation and masochism (or even sadism)' (374).

²³⁹ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). Hart has some similar reflections on tragedy and antique culture in 'God or Nothingness,' in Carl E. Braaten and Christopher R. Seitz (eds.), *I am the Lord Your God: Reflections on the Ten Commandments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 55-76.

²⁴⁰ Hart nonetheless distinguishes his 'narrative' approach from other 'postliberal' theologies that are placed more within the Barthian tradition, especially as regards their rejection of 'metaphysics'. Hart remains an unabashed 'Christian Platonist' and is a champion for the classical tradition. For explicit statements of his persuasion on this matter, see David Bentley Hart, 'Response to James K. A. Smith, Lois Malcolm and Gerard Loughlin'. *New Blackfriars* 88.1017 (2007): 610-623.

²⁴¹ He has more recently returned to this topic in his response to Rowan Williams's *The Tragic Imagination*. For this, see David Bentley Hart, 'The Gospel According to Melpomene: Reflections on Rowan Williams's *The Tragic Imagination*'. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018): 220-234.

Underlying Hart's rejection of 'tragic theology' is his distaste of any preference for a 'suffering God' (374-375).²⁴² For Hart these are theologies of 'masochism' to the extent that they cede ontological 'positivity' to suffering and evil. Hart refuses any such 'positivity' because, firstly, 'theology must insist upon "historicizing evil"', treating it as 'the superscribed text of a palimpsest, obscuring the aboriginal goodness of creation' (384). Hart is clear then in his affirmation of the *privatio boni*: evil is not a 'thing' or 'entity', but rather a privation of goodness. It follows then that a denial of divine impassibility for Hart leads to an undermining of the goodness and metaphysical transcendence of God, and renders evil an ontological necessity (since not even God as the being of all things²⁴³ can avoid the scope of its advancement). Such a perspective also romanticizes suffering, since for Hart there exists no intrinsic connection between suffering and existential betterment: 'suffering is only suffering and nothing more: it is not creative, it does not inspire love but destroys it... pain is essentially parasitic, a privation of being, capable of enriching or perfecting nothing' (375).²⁴⁴ In Hart's estimate, 'the gospel of divine *apatheia* as revealed in Christ' (375) is glad tidings, since it refuses any divine declension before the reality of suffering. God is not altered by the dialectic of evil or finitude but rather, eschatologically-speaking, is able to take creation beyond evil altogether (Hart is a proud exponent of the *apokatastasis panton*).²⁴⁵

For Hart then, 'tragic theology' is damaging precisely because it is *too* conservative, too constrained in its aesthetic receptivity to account for the world-altering event of God's saving action. On the contrary, the 'sacrificial logic' of tragedy ultimately resigns us to injustice, rather than prompting a resistance to the structural evils of society. Speaking of Attic tragedy, Hart says that 'tragedy does not encourage; it offers no promise and seems heroically devoid of mystification; it may endow its protagonist with a certain tragic grandeur, but only one that ends in the embral glow of his or her holocaust'. For him, tragedy does not 'pretend to

²⁴² Also see 155-167; 354-360. One can also consult David Bentley Hart, 'No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility,' in *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 45-69.

²⁴³ That Hart considers God to be 'being' itself is presupposed in his strenuous assertion for the *analogia entis* (which is essential assertion for Hart's entire argument in *The Beauty of the Infinite*). However, Hart has shown in his more recent writings that the idea of God-as-Being is fundamental to the metaphysical and religious traditions more generally, and is not just confined to Christianity and the lineage of Western metaphysics. For this, see David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 87-151. For a summary of his take on the *analogia entis*, see David Bentley Hart, 'The Destiny of Christian Metaphysics: Reflections on the *Analogia Entis*,' in *The Hidden and the Manifest*, 97-112. See also David Bentley Hart, 'Notes on the Concept of the Infinite in the History of Western Metaphysics,' in Michael Heller and W. Hugh Woodin (eds.), *Infinity: New Research Frontiers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 255-274.

²⁴⁴ It is also worth mentioning that Hart is very critical of the various enterprises of theodicy, as can be seen in *The Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), as well as in his beautifully sombre tale 'A Voice from the Emerald World,' in David Bentley Hart, *The Devil and Pierre Gernet: Stories* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 89-122.

²⁴⁵ Cf. David Bentley Hart, 'God, Creation, and Evil: The Moral Meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*'. *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* 3.1 (2015): 1-17.

penetrate the mystery of evil...there is an inscrutable inevitability in the malignity of things that human freedom, far from averting, can only serve' (376). This has theological underpinnings because evil within the antique Greek mind was to be superimposed onto the Olympian realm: 'Attic tragedy often locates evil in no particular place, but in a tension between human culpability and divine malice', one in which 'the tragic is older than the gods' themselves (377). Hart therefore questions references to the 'tragic wisdom' which might be gained, for example, from the Chorus's contemplation of undue suffering. He wonders whether the outcome is less the gaining of 'wisdom' than rather an 'emotional exhaustion' that is unable to counteract 'the invincible violence of being' (379). He examines (briefly) some Greek tragedies (e.g. *The Oresteia*, *The Bacchae*), and comes to the conclusion that they do not contradict his assertion that "the religious dynamism of Attic tragedy" entails 'the form of a closed circle,' that 'it reinforces the civic order it puts into question, by placing that order within a context of cosmic violence' (380).

An exposition of Donald MacKinnon and Nicholas Lash becomes pertinent now: regarding Lash, Hart argues that he 'more or less collapses Easter into Good Friday in such a way that the former takes on the character of simply a second perspective upon the latter', 'a speculative return to the cross', constituting its 'most inward meaning' (382). Particularly worrying for Hart is 'the way [that such a] reading makes knowledge and spiritual comfort the fruit of an annihilation of finite form' (387), turning it into a quasi-pagan *auto-da-fé*. For Hart, Lash's reading of resurrection implies an eternalisation of the cross, a move he rebuffs by saying that 'to reinterpret the resurrection as the speculative inner fold of the crucifixion is also an attempt to moderate the aesthetic affront of Easter' (389). This implies a denial of the radicalness of Easter, and thus underwrites a perpetual return to 'the Same' (387-388). Hart rejects identifying the cross with the resurrection, and argues rather that 'the resurrection occurs apart from the crucifixion, after the crucifixion, in time, and...vindicates not the cross but the Jew who died there' (391).

Regarding MacKinnon, he wonders if one 'might ask whether MacKinnon...has not read the story of the crucifixion in the light of Attic tragedy as read tragedy in Christian terms' (383). Read so, it implicates the story of Jesus in the trajectory of Olympian metaphysics in which violence is ultimately 'mystified' (384), as exemplified in the case of the tragic hero who is scapegoated for the cause of civil harmony (the influence of René Girard is explicit here). He expands this by saying that 'Tragedy universalizes the form of the splendid hero,' but that this figure is ultimately 'excluded, pushed to the margins', and that 'his [or her] suffering cannot inaugurate a new *civitas*, but only restores the balance of the old order'. Thus the hero 'ventures into the void, and so affirms once again that beyond the city walls there is only void'. The hero, therefore, 'dwells always in that penumbral region between *the sublime and the beautiful, guarding the boundaries of both*' [my italics] (385). Referencing Lash's

and MacKinnon's tragic realism – a realism that seeks to disillusion us of world-denying fantasies – Hart suggests (on the contrary) that 'Tragedy is not...an art of disenchantment' because 'metaphysical solace is precisely what the tragic is' (386). Tragedy, rather than being a rupture of bloated expectations, is precisely too 'optimistic'. In distinction from this, the narrative of cross and resurrection is able to affirm both the horrific quality of evil, as well as the 'insane expectation that what is lost will be given back' (392). For Hart, the resurrection is a truly irruptive event, whereas tragic wisdom is resigned to a world of hopeless circumambulation.

As seems clear from the above, Hart is strenuous in his assertion that the adoption of a specifically tragic perspective within Christian theology can only imply a confirmation of exclusionary political systems, in which human beings are sacrificed for social harmony. On this point, Hart's refusal seems clear. However, all of this does not mean that he is rejecting tragedy as a poetic form outright (cf. 375-376), nor that he is homogenizing all 'tragedy' under a rubric of 'sacrificial logic' (he does not think that Shakespeare or Calderón can be painted with the same brushstrokes²⁴⁶). Nor does this imply that Hart is unable to sympathize with the pathos and grandeur of Greek religion,²⁴⁷ or that Christ cannot be understood as a 'tragic' figure in his own right.²⁴⁸ Nonetheless, and despite these qualifications, it is the specifically Greek incarnation of tragic consciousness that remains problematic for Hart. For him, it is embroiled in the sacrificial economy of Olympian religion and ritual, and cannot account for the radical novelty of the Christian gospel. And it is precisely this 'Greek' trajectory which he claims to find in both Lash and MacKinnon's appropriation of tragic themes. With Lash, we have a 'Hegelian' collapse of the resurrection into the crucifixion, and with MacKinnon we have the gospel being read as a Greek tragedy (with all its implied 'sacrificial' overtones).

I will not enter here into an interpretation of Lash's theology of the cross (or contest Hart's reading of Hegel). Rather, my focus is on Donald MacKinnon, and the influence he initiated. Since we have yet to expound MacKinnon's thought in more detail it seems expedient at this stage not to get into an intense debate regarding the content and form of Hart's critique, since

²⁴⁶ Cf. David Bentley Hart, 'Response from David Bentley Hart to McGuckin and Murphy'. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60.1 (2007): 95–101.

²⁴⁷ See for example his short story entitled 'The House of Apollo' in *The Devil and Pierre Gernet*, 64–88.

²⁴⁸ In *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2009), Hart has mentioned in passing (p. 173) that 'Try as we might, we shall never really be able to see Christ's broken, humiliated, and doomed humanity as something self-evidently contemptible and ridiculous; we are instead, in a very real sense, *destined* to see it as encompassing the very mystery of our own humanity: a sublime fragility, at once tragic and magnificent, pitiable and wonderful.' It should however also be said that his rather bleak view of Greek religion and culture (including tragedy) remain intact. On this, see *Atheist Delusions*, 129–145. Also cf. David Bentley Hart, 'Baptism and Cosmic Allegiance: A Brief Observation'. *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20.3 (2012): 457–465.

this is the burden of what is to come in later chapters. What can be said at this stage (by way of foretaste) is that Hart's judgements seem to have a rather sweeping character to them, one that renders his arguments vulnerable in relation to detail. His rather brash examination of MacKinnon, without regard to his complexity, seems to undermine the durability of his critique. Such a tendency is also apparent in his treatment of the Greek tragedians. Does his heuristic of 'sacrificial totality' have universal sway in this regard? One could ask whether this illuminates plays such as *Philoctetes*, *Oedipus at Colonus* or even *The Eumenides*. On his estimate, these plays are rather odd tragedies. Much like the essentialisation of the tragic as found in George Steiner (who Hart quotes at length), he seems to be rather reductive in his approach to Greek tragedy and ostensibly lacks regard for recent scholarship. It is also worth asking whether Hart is sufficiently aware of the Kantian trajectories he incarnates, as when he speaks of 'the tragic hero' as one who dwells between '*the sublime and the beautiful, guarding the boundaries of both*'.²⁴⁹ Is this not an anachronistic poetics? Can it historically account for the fact that this language is *precisely* the product of a post-Kantian aesthetic of the tragic? These are questions I would pose to Hart. As mentioned earlier, my questions are tentative and require deeper argumentation. However, they serve to give an indication of where my trajectory is leading.

4.3. John Milbank: The Tragic as Transcendental Limitation and Sublime Speculation

Milbank's riposte to MacKinnon is different, but cognate with Hart's disagreements. Milbank is less focused than Hart on how we interpret Greek tragedy, and is more concerned about how 'the tragic' moves within MacKinnon's thought both philosophically and ethically. His most sustained critique of MacKinnon is found in a collection of writings penned in honour of MacKinnon,²⁵⁰ which was later re-titled 'A Critique of the Theology of Right'.²⁵¹ The burden of Milbank's essay is to question the Kantian legacy within theology in the name of a revived Thomism.²⁵² Of particular concern are the 'transcendentalist' assumptions that have migrated

²⁴⁹ *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 385.

²⁵⁰ John Milbank, 'Between Purgation and Illumination: A Critique of the Theology of Right,' in Kenneth Surin (ed.), *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), 161-196.

²⁵¹ John Milbank, 'A Critique of the Theology of Right,' in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell 1997), 7-35. My quotations shall be taken from this later version. The pagination is found in the text.

²⁵² The rejection of the Kantian delimitation of metaphysics is pervasive in the writings of Milbank (and Radical Orthodoxy more generally), for a sample and summary of this critique, see John Milbank, 'Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi,' in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 21-37; Milbank, 'The Soul of Reciprocity, Part One: Reciprocity Refused.' *Modern Theology* 17.3 (2001): 336-391 (pp. 371-383); Milbank, 'The Invocation of Clio: A Response'. *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.1 (2005): 3-44 (pp. 13-21); Milbank, 'The Grandeur of Reason and the

uncritically into theological thought. Milbank desires to counteract these tendencies by advocating a renewed focus on theology as ‘metaphysics’ and as a form of ‘historicism’, which he attempts through a Thomistic-inspired and postmodern ‘repetition’ of the *analogia entis* (here understood as a ‘paradoxical’ participation of creatures in the divine perfections). Such notions (as seen in his more recent work) are strongly inflected by a Christian Neoplatonism that seeks to relate notions of analogical participation to ‘theurgic’ accounts of liturgy and human creativity.²⁵³

It is for these reasons that Milbank considers Kantian metaphysics to be dubious, since by confining access to the transcendent only to the practical will (and not ‘reason’), Kant renders transcendence as ‘beyond’ the aegis of discernment, making it unable to adjudicate between rival metaphysical claims, or to articulate a positive account of collective and distributive justice. Such transcendental ‘agnosticism’ is the political foundation for liberalism, since a ‘theology proceeding in the wake of transcendentalism is partially reducible to a liberal rights ideology’ (7).²⁵⁴ Such a political vision is often assumed to be agnostic regarding transcendent values, but such a perspective *already* assumes a secularized and heterodox theology, as Milbank stresses continuously.

Milbank’s metaphysical concerns are immediately apparent in this essay: he initiates it by diving into a portrayal of theological analogy, particularly construed as ‘participation’. Such ‘participation’ implies a truthful speculation of divine being through the capacities of human language; but it is also apophatic since divine nature can never be comprehended. Milbank is critical of Eberhard Jüngel who (he argues) conflates negative theology with a kind of

Perversity of Rationalism: Radical Orthodoxy’s First Decade,’ in Simon Oliver and John Milbank (eds.), *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 367-405 (pp. 368-373); Milbank, ‘Hume Versus Kant: Faith, Reason and Feeling’. *Modern Theology* 27.2 (2011): 276-297.

²⁵³ For a fuller exposé of Milbank’s retrieval of metaphysics, see John Milbank, ‘Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,’ in *The Word Made Strange*, 36-52; Milbank, ‘Only Theology Saves Metaphysics: On the Modalities of Terror,’ in Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler Jr. (eds.), *Belief and Metaphysics* (Great Britain: SCM, 2007), 452-500; Milbank, ‘The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectic: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek,’ in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, (ed.) Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 110-233; Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 19-113; Milbank, ‘Manifestation and Procedure: Trinitarian Metaphysics after Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas,’ in Marco Salvioili (ed.), *Tomismo Creativo* (Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2015), 41-117. For some secondary literature on Milbank’s metaphysics, see Josef Bengtson, *Explorations in Post-Secular Metaphysics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 53-74, and the very good summary found in Olivier-Thomas Venard, O. P., ‘The Litany of Truth and the Scholia on Reason according to Radical Orthodoxy.’ *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 90.2 (2014): 287-322.

²⁵⁴ One can consult here especially Milbank’s critical work on the Western discourse of rights and liberalism. For more, see Milbank, ‘On Complex Space,’ in *The Word Made Strange*, 268-292; Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 162-211; Milbank, ‘Against Human Rights: Liberty in the Western Tradition’. *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 1.1 (2012): 1-32; Milbank, ‘Dignity Rather than Right’. *Open Insight* 5.7 (2013): 77-124; Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 114-269; Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

Kantian transcendentalism, in which the ultimate ‘cause’ of things can only be construed as an indefinite ‘as if’, lacking eminent attribution. Milbank contests Jüngel’s ‘agnostic’ reading of Aquinas as overemphasizing the ‘analogy of proportion’ (e.g. A/B:C/D) while neglecting Aquinas’ more ‘mature’ statements affirming the ‘analogy of attribution (e.g. A/B:C/B).²⁵⁵ In this later version, creation has an analogous relation to being – with God as the medium of such relation – and not some prior known proportion into which God and creation are inserted. Such a construal of analogy maintains ‘a dynamic ontological tension’, in which created being’s analogical naming of God ‘constantly draw[s] forwards towards the divine perfection’ (9). Milbank argues that Kant’s use of the ‘analogy of proportion’ implies ‘a specifiable, fixed, precisely known sort of relation of God to the creation’, since ‘God is only related to creation as efficient cause – he ‘*constructs*’ the world outside himself as an artisan manufactures a clock’ (9). This implies that Kant’s metaphysics is ultimately more ‘dogmatic’ than Aquinas’, in the sense that while Aquinas is more ‘agnostic’ regarding God’s relation to the world, Kant is much less so (despite him being more chary, than Aquinas, regarding God-in-se). His position is confirmed further when one examines the metaphysical lineage that underpins Kant’s ‘phenomenalism’ (e.g. Leibniz and Wolff) whereby ‘noumena’ are unknowable, and yet are fixed by the boundedness of ‘pure reason’.²⁵⁶ For Kant, things-in-themselves remain without content, constituting a ‘sublime’ speculation whereby ‘one is brought up against the margin of organized, formal, ‘beautiful’ experience, and at this margin becomes overwhelmed by the intimation of the materially formless, and infinitely total’ (10).²⁵⁷ Kant’s ‘dogmatism’ asserts an aprioristic division of the metaphysical realm from phenomena, and the categories of understanding from ‘things-in-themselves’. But such a standpoint already implies the conceit of a metaphysical spectator who is able to survey the interrelations within being, determining from ‘outside’ where one ‘phenomena’ ends and another begins. Furthermore, it assumes a scheme-content dichotomy in which categories apply only to the epistemological surface of things, rather than to ontological depth. Such a

²⁵⁵ For more on this see, Bernard Landry, ‘L’analogie de proportion chez saint Thomas d’Aquin’. *Revue néo-scholastique de philosophie* 24.95 (1922): 257-280; ‘L’analogie de proportionnalité chez saint Thomas d’Aquin’. *Revue néo-scholastique de philosophie* 24.96 (1922): 454-464; Louis Millet, ‘Analogie et participation chez Saint Thomas d’Aquin’. *Les Études philosophiques* 3-4 (1989): 371-383. Bernard Montagnes, *The Doctrine of the Analogy of Being according to Thomas Aquinas*, trans. E. M. Macierowski and Pol Vandavelde (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004); Reinhard Hütter, ‘Attending to the Wisdom of God – from Effect to Cause, from Creation to God: A relecture of the Analogy of Being according to Thomas Aquinas,’ in Thomas Joseph White (ed.), *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 209-245.

²⁵⁶ Milbank, ‘A Critique of the Theology of Right,’ 9.

²⁵⁷ For more on Milbank’s critique of the modern aesthetic of ‘sublimity’, see John Milbank, ‘The Sublime in Kierkegaard,’ in Phillip Blond (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998), 68-81; Milbank, ‘Beauty and the Soul,’ in John Milbank, Graham Ward and Edith Wyschogrod, *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* (Harrisburg, Trinity Press International, 2003), 1-34 (pp. 1-9); Milbank, ‘Sublimity: The Modern Transcendent,’ in Regina Schwartz (ed.), *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 211-234.

move is objectifying in the sense that it places the observer ‘above’ the fray of metaphysical entanglement, in the name of rational delimitation. For Milbank, these are unfounded assumptions which assume a panoptic contemplation of things that is both ahistorical and dogmatist. Such a procedure is predicated largely on a ‘metaphysics of the sublime’, in which ‘one can step up to a boundary where one ‘sees’ that phenomenal categories no longer apply, and where one grasps, with necessity, that there are things-in-themselves, even if one can give no content to them’ (11).

The political implications of this metaphysics for Kant’s ethics is that freedom is understood in a largely formalist sense, in which each individual is understood to have an unalienable, negative liberty vis-à-vis other agents.²⁵⁸ However, such freedom is ultimately without content, and can only be politically guaranteed by the state, and ontologically inferred from a law-giving, unknowable God who ordains permanent and unchangeable statutes of ‘nature’ that are read off by the rational subject.²⁵⁹ Such a notion of freedom for Milbank exemplifies the tradition of liberalism, whereby the concept of freedom comes to be treated in a purely ‘negative’ sense, without including more substantive notions of how freedom is to be understood as collective negotiation and interrelation. Milbank thinks that Kant remains largely within this liberal tradition, but he does not disregard some countervailing instances where Kant might want to push beyond it (though Milbank thinks these are finally unsuccessful).

His discussion of Kant weaves back into a reflection on Aquinas,²⁶⁰ where he is critical (though appreciative) of the work of David Burrell. Burrell, in his earlier work, sought to understand Aquinas’s ‘grammatical’ reflections on analogy in a ‘speculative’ and ‘agnostic’ fashion, in the sense that language of God is able to take us to the edge of finitude, without providing a intuition regarding the content of such language beyond the realms of human experience. Milbank interprets this move to be both anachronistic and proto-Kantian since this ‘involves the assumption that Aquinas thought in terms of straddling the boundary of the sublime in a way different from, but not wholly dissimilar to, that of Kant’. For Milbank, ‘it is

²⁵⁸ This language of negative freedom is drawn from the analyses of Isaiah Berlin in ‘Two Concepts of Liberty,’ in *Liberty*, (ed.) Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 169-178.

²⁵⁹ Milbank considers this to be a move within the ‘Baroque’ tradition of scholasticism that stems from Francisco Suárez. More generally speaking, one can infer from this essay that Milbank considers the Kantian tradition overall to lie within a certain Scotist (and Ockhamist) trajectory, whereby God’s relation to the world is understood in a ‘fixed’ and ‘univocalist’ fashion, and the will is given priority over the faculties of reason and understanding. Milbank is by no means the only figure to have traced such a genealogy. For example, see André De Muralt, Kant, le dernier occamien: une nouvelle définition de la philosophie moderne’. *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 80.1 (1975): 32-53.

²⁶⁰ Milbank’s more recent appropriations of Aquinas only confirm and a further buttress the ‘linguistic’ and ‘historicist’ interpretation presented in this early essay. For more, see Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Milbank, ‘The Thomistic Telescope: Truth and Identity.’ *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80.2 (2006): 193-226; Milbank, ‘On “Thomistic Kabbalah”’. *Modern Theology* 27.1 (2011): 147-185.

wholly relevant to say here that such an aesthetic was not culturally available to Aquinas', and also thinks that it is 'relevant to ask whether associating Aquinas with a 'speculative grammar' of this precise type is not slightly anachronistic in terms of the chronology of mediaeval thought' (13). Milbank argues that the 'quasi-foundationalist' understanding of grammar, one that attempts to scientifically fix the meaning of words before they are appropriated theologically, stems from Scotism rather than Thomism. Such foundationalism (as Milbank's later work emphasizes strongly) leads to an overly epistemological and 'semantic' approach to questions of 'truth', being predicated upon Kantian theories of correspondence.²⁶¹ As such, Milbank thinks that Burrell's interpretation of Aquinas's thought is located in a misreading of Thomas's idea of 'participated perfections' (and ultimately his theology of creation), in which the 'known' and 'unknown' meaning of words are formed together, since (within contingency) our designations of being always remain within the tension of *esse* and *essentia*, where actualities can exceed notions of fixed 'substance' and abstract 'possibility'. Aquinas's notion of 'active potency', according to Milbank, effectively 'eschatologizes' reality, directing it towards the 'super-addition' of divine grace (14).²⁶² It follows from this that Aquinas does not give reasons why there is 'being-in-general' (a Leibnizian question), nor is he interested in the Kantian question of whether being is merely a predicate or not.²⁶³ For Aquinas, 'being-in-general' is disclosed through particular beings, who themselves participate in God, who is a 'super-ordinate trans-essentiality' (14) that gives existence to beings themselves. Being, rather than being fixed and predetermined, is open and non-finalisable, since it participates in the infinitude of God. This constitutes the ontological ground for analogical language: for Aquinas 'the possibility of analogy is grounded in this reality of participation in being and goodness. Analogy is not, for him, primarily a linguistic

²⁶¹ One can compare here the comments made by Milbank in 'The Grandeur of Reason and the Perversity of Rationalism,' 388: '[Radical Orthodoxy] regards the linguistic turn as fundamentally correct, but does not read this in a quasi-transcendentalist way...as confining us all the more within finite limits, but rather as rendering the Kantian basis of securing these limits as 'impossible' by undoing the Kantian 'correlation' between *a priori* categories and *a posteriori* appearances, respectively established from independent sources.'

²⁶² Also see John Milbank, 'Faith, Reason and Imagination: The Study of Theology and Philosophy in the 21st Century,' *Transversalités: Revue de l'Institut Catholique de Paris* 101.2 (2007): 69-86 (p. 82) for more comments on metaphysics and historicity, and its relation to the interplay between essence and existence. For a similar reading of Aquinas's notion of *esse* and *essentia*, see Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas: Three Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957) and Gilbert Narcisse, O.P., 'Thomistic Realism?' *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition 8.4 (2010): 783-798.

²⁶³ Cf. 'Manifestation and Procedure,' 89: 'Aquinas thinks that there can be no real or thought essence independent of unity or some degree of actuality. Thus he has...shown that the merely formal distinction of being and essence (which in modern times will be exacerbated to the view that 'being is not a predicate' in Kant and Frege), by tending at once to existentialize essence and essentialise an empty existence, tends to fantasise their prising apart. By comparison, Aquinas clearly indicates that the real distinction involves no such virtually latent sundering'. Kant's own discussion of this can be found in his critique of the ontological argument; cf. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A592-602 = B620-630.

doctrine, even if...it must become so for us – though not in a manner which persists in the transcendentalist illusion that a ‘semantic’ account of analogy can be given before an ontological account of participation’ (15). A Thomistic ‘metaphysics of participation’ implies that all generalized ‘grammar’ lies upon a truly theological foundation (in distinction from the tradition of Scotus), and that axiological language regarding degrees of ‘perfections’ implies analogical participation.²⁶⁴

In the second part, Milbank moves onto a discussion of how ‘liberal deontology’ has entered into theology, here seeking to include Donald MacKinnon within this trajectory. According to Milbank, MacKinnon’s work ‘straddles the boundary of the sublime’, and ‘does so with more perplexity and more intensity than almost anyone else’s’. Milbank notes in MacKinnon’s dual insistence on the category of ‘purgation’ as merely a ‘descriptive’ exercise in metaphysics, and the more ‘speculative’ category of ‘illumination’ which aims at ‘some sort of positive affirmation of transcendence’. As such, MacKinnon attempts to articulate something like the analogy of attribution, but here through ‘a kenotic and tragic Christology’. However, Milbank estimates that this bifurcation between ‘purgation’ and ‘illumination’ (like its Kantian counterpart) is problematic since ‘to conceive of purgation entirely as a *prelude* to illumination, or of ‘description’ as a task innocent of speculation, may forestall illumination altogether, or else radically determine its instance’ (18). Milbank’s argumentation here is aimed at placing MacKinnon within a Kantian trajectory, as seen especially in MacKinnon’s program of relating ethics to metaphysics. Following in the footsteps of Joseph Butler, MacKinnon suggests that ‘a deontological ethics requires qualification in so far as our conduct may be radically guided by attention to particular facts or particular persons regarded as embodying particular sets of values’, and that ‘metaphysics may have to become constitutive rather than merely regulative to the degree that our naturally-given metaphysical disposition cannot help assigning to this or that representation a better clue to ultimate reality than what is found elsewhere’ (18). Butler is important for his metaphysico-ethical project because ‘MacKinnon effects a sort of Christological reworking of Butlerian analogy, such that the essential content of revelation tends to be reduced to a more intense affirmation of the essential ‘natural’ limits of human existence as providing sufficient guidance for our lives’ (19).

However, Milbank thinks that this method exudes an unstable ‘freight of positivity’, and links this heritage to the influence of the Anglican Henry Mansel,²⁶⁵ whereby natural law (in a

²⁶⁴ Cf. Milbank, ‘A Critique of the Theology of Right,’ 16.

²⁶⁵ Of Mansel, Milbank writes (‘A Critique of the Theology of Right’, 19) that he ‘was consequently anti-mystical and clearly stressed that the positive critical determination of the ‘limits of religion’ and positive finite knowledge of revelation was *opposed* to any *via negativa*’. This is because, as Don Cupitt has shown, Mansel equated orthodoxy with a form of ‘practical divinity’, which he understood to be a purely ‘regulative’ account of faith, eschewing all varieties of metaphysical ‘speculation’. For

post-Suárezian manner²⁶⁶) achieves such an apex of importance that now the contents and ‘facts’ of revelation do not tell us anything new about the criteria of moral behaviour. This is not to forget the ‘critical’ and ‘negative’ procedure of Butlerian ethics that greatly influenced MacKinnon; however Milbank thinks that he is too quick in identifying this tradition with the *via negativa* (19).²⁶⁷ Additionally problematic for Milbank is MacKinnon’s version of ‘realist pluralism’, as drawn from G.E. Moore. In a passage worth quoting at length, Milbank argues that the tendency of ‘realist pluralism’ is to insist that

things can be adequately known and distinguished as they are in themselves without believing that their full determination awaits upon the infinity of relations they may have to everything else...This should adequately avoid any absolute determinism, because here there can be no ‘whole’ distinct from the network of relationships, which are always relations of particular, distinguishable things. Certainly, to maintain this distinguishability, one needs to say that entities may be relatively discrete, relatively indifferent to certain relations in which they may fall. And yet even such indifference, such ‘resistance’ can help negatively to determine what they are and what they become (19).

Milbank does grant that Aristotelian ‘substance’ is helpful in avoiding any ‘totalizing’ picture of ‘pure’ process’, but he suggests that ‘substance’ should rather be understood as ‘a linguistic marker for certain patterns of narrative consistency in which, none the less, we can never identify any ‘underlying’ constant element’. MacKinnon’s ‘non-dialectical’

Mansel, God is fundamentally unknowable, and therefore theology is concerned with propounding practicable verities that are to be obeyed rather than thought. Since God is eminently un-cognizable, there can be no growth or development in theological knowledge, no coherent account of analogy, or any negative theology for that matter. It is not insignificant to notice here also that Mansel, through an adoption of a Kantian epistemology and its divorce between rationality and faith, assisted in the development of Victorian and theistic agnosticism. This current, drawing from the insights of Kant and Hamilton, contributed to the religious scepticism found in thinkers such as Herbert Spencer, T. H. Huxley and Sir Leslie Stephen. On Mansel’s place within the history of British agnosticism, see Bernard Lightman, ‘Henry Longueville Mansel and the Origins of Agnosticism’. *History of European Ideas* 5.1 (1984): 45-64. For his opposition to ‘speculation’, see Don Cupitt, ‘Mansel’s Theory of Regulative Truth’. *The Journal of Theological Studies* 18.1 (1967): 104-126

²⁶⁶ See Milbank, ‘A Critique of the Theology of Right,’ 19. The French jurist and philosopher Michel Villey confirms this picture of Suárez: in distinction from the Aristotelian, Roman and Thomist tradition, Suárez has an *a priori*, ‘systematic’ and ‘rationalist’ account of legality, in which *jus* becomes convertible with *lex*, and ‘right’ has become equated with the subjective and individualist rights. Cf. Michel Villey, ‘Remarque sur la notion de droit chez Suarez’. *Archives de Philosophie*, 42.2 (1979): 219-227. It is this tradition, as Villey argues, that has led to a ‘juridical positivism’, and a rather scientific conception of law that fails to account for the reality of prudence and flexibility as essential to any exercise of legal judgement. He makes these arguments in Villey, ‘Epitome of Classical Natural Law’. *Griffith Law Review* 9.1 (2000): 74-97 and ‘Epitome of Classical Natural Law (Part II)’. *Griffith Law Review* 10.1 (2001): 153-178.

²⁶⁷ Milbank does however think that the influence of Henry Scott Holland might make this picture a bit more complicated.

appropriation of Aristotelian ‘substance’ (here mediated through logical atomism) opens up aporias since it appears on the contrary that ‘things are, in fact, entirely constituted through networks of changing relationships’, and that ‘the more one seeks to isolate them in their determinate finitude, the more their concreteness altogether escapes us, and their sheer particularity becomes paradoxically their only remaining property: a particularity about which we can say nothing’, ‘with the result that for all practical purposes one particular becomes the same as all other particulars’. This formalism leads ‘back to the Kantian things-in-themselves which turn out to be the economic and political equivalences of liberal, post-enlightenment society (19-20).

MacKinnon’s version of sublime speculation ultimately leads to Milbank’s critique of his use of tragic themes. In addition to the existential focus on ‘the tragic’ found in MacKinnon’s work, Milbank speculates that there are additional reasons for MacKinnon’s choice of such motifs. He suggests that ‘there may also be a disguised formalist reason for his concentration on this mode of narrative’. He suggests that his election of this genre is based on a hyper-realist ‘transcendence’ that is ‘preoccupied with the Platonic notion of presence [rather] than with the Aristotelian version of *telos*’. Such metaphysical concentration privileges a ‘tragic indecision which occasions a kind of *exit* from the narrative instead of remaining in the plot and seeking for resolutions’. Milbank suggests that it is *wrong* to say ‘that MacKinnon simply discovers history to be tragic’; rather, he ‘*emplots* history within a privileged tragic framework’, hereby transforming ‘the categorical imperative itself into something very like the view that it is *only* in tragic perplexity that we know we are free, and at the same time are brought up against the very margins of the humanly responsible world’. This imitates post-Kantian and Schillerian trends, since it implies that we only discover our authenticity when ‘we do not any longer know how to act, then we discover ourselves as transcendent subjects standing ‘above’ our usual narratively instantiated characters. But this has to be read as an extremely subtle version of the aesthetics of the sublime, of the liberal discourse of modernity’ (21). Rather than placing choices within an unfolding history, MacKinnon apparently converts tragic complexity and limit into a transcendentalized mode of ‘presence’ that defies any narrative ‘solution’. Rowan Williams captures Milbank’s critique of MacKinnon succinctly. For Milbank, MacKinnon’s moral philosophy aims to ‘naturalize’²⁶⁸ the tragic, since it is only within ‘the destructively conflicting absolutes of tragic decision that we discover the nature of our human responsibility’. Milbank worries that MacKinnon ‘lacks a theory as to how non-destructive social practices may be created and maintained, and so is trapped in a standoff between purely individual motivation, with whatever integrity it can muster, and the inescapably corrupting and lethal realities of the public world’. MacKinnon

²⁶⁸ Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*. The Literary Agenda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 108.

therefore is unable to articulate thicker descriptions of *Sittlichkeit*, in which we come to recognize ‘the moral self in the other or in the communal discourse of humanity’.²⁶⁹ Rather his tendency to treat tragic irresolution as a mode of ‘presence’ seems to imply ‘a near-Manichaeian metaphysic’, or even a ‘fundamental sickness or rupture in reality’.²⁷⁰ For Milbank, the operative mode of ‘tragic narration’ in MacKinnon leads to a denial of ‘the significance of narrative itself’, in which human characters are able to ‘genuinely grow and change with the passage of time’, implying an emptying of ‘the very idea of plot’ since it fails to account for the reality of ‘change’ that is bound up with ‘a sequence of narrated events’. In MacKinnon’s account, it seems, ‘*nothing really alters*’.²⁷¹ His transcendentalism avoids historical mediation, foreclosing its outcome before it has arrived.

Milbank supports this by focusing on MacKinnon’s ‘Butlerian’ balancing of utilitarian and deontological claims, which he argues (in distinction from Kant) ultimately creates a kind of tragic conflict between privatized self-authenticity and public duty. In MacKinnon, such a ‘conflict’ is introduced as a ‘surd’ element in the spheres of human interaction. This move is ‘ahistorical’ since it assumes ‘the permanence of the conflict between a public sphere of objective, and strictly equivalent justice and a private sphere of forgiving cancellation of fault’ (22).²⁷² Milbank is quick however to clarify that he is not chiding MacKinnon for his willingness to wrestle with tragic realities as such, but he does wonder whether ‘the ultimate Christian perspective may not be one of tragi-comic irony rather than unappeased tragedy’. He wonders whether it might be possible ‘*in retrospect...* to determine our failure to attain the Aristotelian mean,’ that is, to discern where ‘these sorts of conflicts...these sorts of ‘perverse upshots’ of apparently desirable courses of action’ may arise from. Might they be due ‘to a lack of integration in our society, or the lack of a sufficiently encompassing social imagination’? To affirm this is to deny that evil is a necessary outcome, since ‘every evil is traceable to some lack, or perhaps rather to some sort of symbolic distortion, some imperfect vision’ (22). But since MacKinnon appears to have problems with this move, Milbank thinks that his procedure discloses both his suspicion of the Augustinian *privatio boni* and his preference for modes of God-talk that espouse divine passibility. It seems then that a Kantian account of ‘radical evil’ lurks in the background of MacKinnon’s accounts of suffering.²⁷³ Additionally, an affirmation of divine passibility would appear to endorse an ontological determination of divine being by evil and suffering, leaving unclear how such a God could

²⁶⁹ See Milbank, ‘Critique of the Theology of Right,’ 23-24.

²⁷⁰ *The Tragic Imagination*, 109

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁷² For Milbank’s account of forgiveness, one that seeks to engage the perspectives of Arendt, Derrida, and Jankélévitch, see John Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 44-60.

²⁷³ Milbank has stringently critiqued this Kantian tradition in a chapter entitled ‘Evil: Darkness and Silence’, to be found in Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 1-25.

suffer evil in order to leave evil ‘behind’.²⁷⁴ This position is ultimately entwined with a form of theodicy in which suffering is justified, and the tragic limits of the world are ontologically confirmed. For Milbank, ‘if evil is not a surd element outside the world-text which human beings write, then within this narrative it can be constantly re-enacted, re-presented, shown up as mere subjectivity, and so contained’ (23). In other words: if evil is rational or has ‘being’, then it can be justified. Milbank goes as far as to say that MacKinnon’s kenotic Christology, arguably, is itself a form of theodicy, insofar as it involved the ‘making known of limits and of evil’ (23) instead of rendering evil as nothingness, something that is to be eschatologically ‘forgotten’ rather than ‘known’.

Summarizing what we have said thus far: Milbank’s concern (like Hart’s) is implicated in his adherence to a ‘postmodern’ retrieval of a traditioned, Christian account of metaphysics. Both see MacKinnon’s penchant for tragedy as having dubious metaphysical and political outcomes. While Hart seems to emphasize, on a more general level, the negative florations of ‘tragic theology’ (and its entwinement with a sacrificial economy), Milbank is focused on how a ‘Kantian’ reception of tragedy within Christian thought leads to pessimism (i.e. ‘radical evil’), a notion of theological metaphysics that is unable to account for historicity (due to its transcendentalist assumptions). Furthermore, it implies a minimalist account of political imagination that is focused largely on ‘authenticity’ and negative liberty, as disclosed in dilemmas, while failing to articulate a robust account of common and distributive goods. Milbank suspects that MacKinnon’s account of tragedy fails because of its ultimately ‘speculative’ and ‘transcendentalist’ assumptions, since it insists (in a dogmatic fashion) on tragic necessities being inserted into stories, rather than being discovered in them, a tendency which precisely *removes* such narratives from their lived historicity and openness. This is not to say that Milbank gives no space for existential tragedy within his own thinking – his comments on the South African church struggle during Apartheid in the same essay counter-act this assertion (30-31).²⁷⁵ Nor does it even imply that he is fundamentally opposed to nuanced ‘tragic theologies’.²⁷⁶ He also contextualizes MacKinnon’s polarization on

²⁷⁴ Milbank also wonders whether accounts of divine passibility are subject to Rousseau’s critique of sympathy, in the sense that it can displace the subjective, first-person dimension of suffering. Milbank also thinks that accounts of ‘divine passibility’ can be partially deconstructed via Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity’s supposed glorification of sacrifice and weakness. For this, see Milbank, ‘Immutability/Impassibility, Divine,’ in Jean-Yves Lacoste (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology: Volume 2* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 760-762.

²⁷⁵ Milbank’s reference to the South African context is present in his earlier version of the same essay (cf. ‘Between Illumination and Purgation’, 191), but has been removed in later version, due no doubt to the changed circumstances in the country since the early 1990’s.

²⁷⁶ Cf. Milbank’s comments in ‘The Second Difference’ in *The Word Made Strange* (p. 182): ‘If one claims, in the ‘strong’ sense, that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, then this can open the way to a tragic theology in which one sees that the fall takes away from God’s own proper glory, and makes apparently unattainable the divine goal of absolute goodness’. In passing, it should also be mentioned that David Toole has applied the rubric of ‘tragic theology’ to Milbank’s theology as a

deontology rather than on *sittlich* ethics as belonging to the fragmentation of Britain after the Second World War,²⁷⁷ a concession which does soften his stringent critique somewhat.

Nevertheless, he continues to think that MacKinnon's metaphysics of 'illumination' and 'purgation' is unable to reconcile historicism and metaphysics, and that this is due to his rejection of 'the analogy of attribution' and its participatory metaphysics. Such is acutely apparent in his account of 'the tragic', since it already claims to know in advance the limits of historical novelty, imagination and action *before* attending to the particularities of stories, and how narratives of suffering are reclaimed, re-imagined and re-worked. Again, this is due (in Milbank's view) to MacKinnon's Kantian 'tragic piety', which is unable to think the historical 'possibility of the ethical' since it 'after all, *evades* the tragic, by hypostasizing it in a speculative fashion'.²⁷⁸ Such a perspective locks us (here echoing Hart's concerns) into a metaphysics of sacrifice and scarcity that is unable to account for the ontological plenitude of divine generosity.²⁷⁹ Such a perspective, for Milbank, is the foundation for dubious ontologies of violence and unjust political arrangements, including liberalized capitalism (based as it is, ultimately, upon 'the myth of scarcity').

The concerns of Milbank and Hart have shown that there are several sites of contention and debate, namely (1) *the relation of metaphysics to the question of history* (as seen as pre-eminently in the *analogia entis*), and how this relates to (2) *the reception of Kantian metaphysics* within MacKinnon's work (and tragic philosophy more generally). Here the question of how the tragic operates within MacKinnon's thinking becomes pertinent, and we should hope to discover whether the suspicions that both Hart and Milbank have are warranted. Of related concern is whether (3) 'tragedy' as such participates in a *sacrificial economy* and if (4) MacKinnon's appropriation of the tragic within ethics leads either to a 'liberal' or 'pessimist' mode of political reasoning. Additionally, there is the question of whether (5) MacKinnon *underplays the resurrection in relation to tragic indeterminacy*, and occludes the radical trans-valuation of death that Easter performs. But also important for our

whole (a description I am sure Milbank would have some qualms with, or at least would like to qualify drastically). On this see, David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998). Also, cf. Catherine Pickstock, 'Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins'. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54.3 (2001): 405-422 (pp. 418-419). However, preeminence should fall upon Milbank's own reflections in *Being Reconciled*, 138-161 on 'The Midwinter Sacrifice'. Here Milbank seeks to redeem and radicalize the category of 'moral luck' (echoing Bernard Williams) under the rubric of divine grace.

²⁷⁷ Milbank, 'A Critique of the Theology of Right,' 30.

²⁷⁸ Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 149. He goes on to say, in the next sentence, that 'MacKinnon failed to see that Speculative Idealism espoused exactly the romantic and not perhaps very Greek cult of the tragic, which he himself perpetuated – revealing thereby his own idealism despite all his explicit disavowals, rooted in his Kantianism'.

²⁷⁹ See John Milbank, 'Enclaves, or Where is the Church?' *New Blackfriars* 73.861 (1992): 341–352 (pp. 349-352). For a more nuanced account of sacrifice (one that is able to retrieve its insights, while acknowledging its potential pitfalls). Cf. Milbank, 'Stories of Sacrifice'. *Modern Theology* 12.1 (1996): 27-56.

purposes are the cognate objections of Hart and Milbank relating to (6) *theologies of divine suffering*, and (7) *the rejection of Platonic-Augustinian theory of evil-as-privation*, and how these are connected to a post-Kantian mode of sublime speculation. Underlying all these questions is the problem of how Christian theology, narrates its specific account of God's transcendence since it relates to its analogical account of the creator-created, infinite-finite relation (1), and how this is to be distinguished from post-Kantian and postmodern theories of aesthetic sublimity (2). This classical recounting of divine transcendence, here presupposed and argued for by Hart and Milbank, also impinges upon (5), (6), and (7) since in different ways they are concerned about this fundamental question. Similarly, (3) and (4) concern the kind of transcendence here envisaged, and whether this is to be construed as malevolent or pessimistic. Such a vision underlies, according to Hart and Milbank, the sacrificial tendencies of the Greek polis, and ultimately – though with due respect to historical differences – the liberal order too.

These are the main contentions which we hope to address in what is to follow. However, a detailed response to *all* of them would be difficult. For example, it would be difficult in the space provided to engage in some detailed readings of Attic tragedy, with the aim of showing that Hart's interpretations are simplistic. So since we are unable to address every issue here, we have decided to focus specifically on those critiques that relate to the research question, namely the relationship between metaphysics and the tragic, specifically as this relates to the grammars of transcendence. Here, once more, we can restate our research question: are their varieties of transcendence that make it harder for a classical metaphysics to appropriate the tragic? And if this is so, is there a systematic remedy? Can one conceptualize an orthodox account of transcendence (e.g. aseity, *analogia entis*, etc.) that is able to address the tragic in all seriousness, or is their relation strictly oppositional? There will be occasion along the way to address less pertinent objections and questions. But for the most part, the above node of concentration will serve as a guide for the way my arguments are spelled-out. My focus in the next chapter will be on MacKinnon's *The Problem of Metaphysics*, attempting here to structure its development according to that work's internal conjecture and argument, in light of the critical reception that we have just discussed.

Chapter 5

Donald MacKinnon II: On Aporetics and Apophatics

In this chapter, we begin to unpack the work of Donald MacKinnon, especially as it relates to his understanding of metaphysics, and how this inquiry relates to ‘the tragic’. To gain a point of entry, we will focus pre-eminently on his Gifford Lectures. The structure of this text will provide a workable format in which to trace the wider contours of his rather complex and multifarious argument, spread over a diversity of published work. We cannot however avoid some detours in order to understand more fully his progression as it relates to those thinkers who informed him. In particular, we shall have to deal with the legacies of Aristotle and Kant as they impact his argument. We suggest here that MacKinnon’s dependence on Aristotle’s *aporetics* of substance provides an enlightening entrance into his metaphysics, firstly in that it privileges *particularity* as the starting-point for *abstraction*, and secondly in that it does not resolve the tension between these movements. Universality segues into minutiae and proceeds from them too. But this tradition is complicated by the fact that Aristotle’s Prime Mover has no connection to the material particularity of things. When this is combined with an atomism of substance – after G.E. Moore – the metaphysical connectedness between things is rendered opaque, as is their relationship to the divine. Moreover, on top of this, MacKinnon adopts a Kantian *apophatics* without analogical participation. Following Aristotle and Plato’s *Parmenides*, MacKinnon rejects *methexis* as a resolution to the problems of predication – of how we come to know distinct things – since it simply pushes the dilemma into a regression (*the Third Man Argument*).²⁸⁰ Similarly, after Kant, MacKinnon thinks that ‘being’ cannot be a predicate considered as something added to essence (*Kant’s Critique of the Ontological Argument*).²⁸¹ Like the previous argument, it says that duplication does not clarify anything. On the contrary, ‘being’ is simply a *positing*, that is, a judgement about concrete existence. *To be* does not add anything to the essence of things, but just describes their sheer presence. For MacKinnon and Kant, to speak of ‘being’ as a predicate is just tautology.

MacKinnon initiates his discussion in *The Problem of Metaphysics (PM)* by embarking on an exposition of Kant and Aristotle, who serve as examples of ‘descriptive metaphysics’ (a

²⁸⁰ See Gregory Vlastos, ‘The Third Man Argument in the Parmenides’. *The Philosophical Review* 63.3 (1954): 319-349.

²⁸¹ See Alvin Plantinga, ‘Kant’s Objection to the Ontological Argument’. *The Journal of Philosophy* 63.19 (1966): 537-546; Jaakko Hintikka, ‘Kant on Existence, Predication, and the Ontological Argument’. *Dialectica* 35.1-2 (1981): 127-146.

phrase borrowed from P. F. Strawson).²⁸² MacKinnon's estimation of them is that they 'both carried out systematic enquiries aimed at laying bare the most fundamental and pervasive features of the world around us, the manner in which those features are interrelated and the identity and nature of those concepts revealed by analysis to be involved in all descriptive and referential discourse' (*PM*, 1).²⁸³ For Kant, metaphysics is that systematic framing of any conceivable and objective world within repeatable structures, so that for *any* world to appear to us it must take place within such forms (this is Kant's 'transcendental deduction'). They cannot be *observed* but must be *presupposed* to make sense of the world, that is, they must be *a priori synthetic judgements*. These patterns are articulated as the ineradicable setting of our 'recognition capacities', which are further subdivided into the first and second order concepts of 'understanding'. The latter of these is defined as being an activity of 'pure' cognition whereby the human mind or subject seeks to relate, abstractly, the various features of the world as it presents itself (*PM*, 2-4).²⁸⁴ Such structures are conceptualized by Kant within those elemental laws of constancy and constraint which are foundational for any coherent or rational understanding of the world (*PM*, 4-6). However, these consistencies need to be chastened, according to Kant, when we move from the immanent to the transcendent realm, since we cannot simply 'estimate the relations of the conditioned to the unconditioned, the relative to the absolute' (*PM*, 7), that is, by applying the concepts of 'substance' and 'causality' beyond the phenomenal plane of perception. For MacKinnon, such a metaphysical reserve acts as a *theologia negativa* within the logics of transcendentalism.

MacKinnon is at pains throughout to emphasize that the Kantian deduction of experience should not be understood in a non-realist fashion, as if such structures in the world were there merely 'for us' and not inherent within what-is-perceived. For Kant, 'neither understanding nor imagination creates its own objects', since 'to come to know what is the case is a finding, not a fashioning' (*PM*, 7). MacKinnon's predisposition here is towards the priority of 'discovery' over fabrication, and is aimed at preserving a sense of the objectivity or over-against-ness of reality. Such empiricism cannot be conceived apart from creative assimilation and conjecture, even though MacKinnon is strident that the mind does not create what confronts it. This sits in tension with Kant's general 'anthropocentrism', but MacKinnon is quick to add that Kant's awareness of the inherent finitude of reason can also be

²⁸² The phrase is found chiefly in P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1959). Strawson distinguished two kinds of metaphysical enterprises which he terms 'descriptive' and 'revisionary'. He describes the difference as follows (p. 9): 'Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure.'

²⁸³ Donald M. MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

²⁸⁴ In a discussion that seems inflected by Strawson's understanding of the material identification of particulars (cf. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, 15-58).

commandeered for *theological* purposes, since conceptualization should not transgress the bounds of sense (*PM*, 9).

For Aristotle, the question hinges on the relation between ‘being’ and ‘substance’, in which ‘the categories of being’ are considered as ‘a developing series’ in which ‘substance’ is ‘the most fundamental form of being’ (*PM*, 10-11). Philosophical reflection on substantiality implies that ‘The whole pattern of our conceptual organisation is pivoted on that which exists of itself’ (*PM*, 12), that is, with the nature of things, and what they essentially are. Seeking to defend Aristotle against Collingwood (cf. *PM*, 10, 12), MacKinnon argues that ‘for Aristotle being is not a generic universal, but a transcendental one which manifests a peculiar sort of analogical unity’, a unity which is ‘identified in the end with the most fundamental sorts of things there are in the world, in the peculiar dependence of lower form upon higher’ (*PM*, 12-13). Such analogical predication implies that existence is not ‘univocal’ since this would obfuscate the manifoldness of existing things. Metaphysical reflection on the proliferate diversity of being, in Aristotle, is understood to be a combination of ‘analytic’ and ‘speculative’ procedures, since the ontological foundations of experience are not enclosed within febrile certainty, but instead appear in a confusion of the ‘extremely elusive’ and the ‘extremely familiar’ – hence the need for analogy (*PM*, 14). But important to note is that MacKinnon’s preference is ultimately for Plato and Kant’s ‘negative theology’ over Aristotelian analogy: in his eyes, anthropomorphism is the graver religious temptation when compared to aphasia. It is shortly hereafter that MacKinnon expresses a tacit agreement with Aristotle’s critique of the Platonic ideas, and his account of *methexis* (*PM*, 18), despite his worry that the Stagirite remains overconfident in his relating of ‘ontological analysis’ and ‘cosmological theology’ (*PM*, 14-16).

The above delineation gives some sense of MacKinnon’s appreciation of Kant and Aristotle. But since MacKinnon has developed these readings in more detail elsewhere, we will engage these texts before returning again to *PM*, since the influence of these respective thinkers is essential for understanding his intellectual habits more generally.

5.1. Aristotle’s Aporeticism: On Substance

For Aristotle, to know the particular is difficult since the essence (or ‘what-ness’) of things remains elusive. To grasp concrete examples involves the persistent labour of description and re-evaluation; it is because of this that the individual remains ‘aporematic’ (or ‘difficult’). The abstraction of real entities involves establishing the essential and the universal, while not avoiding the accretions of the accidental and contingent. In the process of reflection, Aristotle argues, one intuits the intelligible Forms of nature, thereby excavating their connection to material composition, while always seeking to connect these discoveries to their ultimate

reason-for-being (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι). Such implies a cosmos teleologically-orientated towards conceptualization, a movement that imitates the supreme intelligence and self-understanding of the Prime Mover itself.²⁸⁵ It is this dynamic that informs the unending experimentation and exploration at the basis of Aristotle's inquiry into 'substance'.

Aristotle recognized that 'being' had multiple instances (*Metaphysics* VI.1026a34ff.). But as MacKinnon says, such diversity is unified in accordance with an 'analogous polarisation' on the idea of 'substance': 'The metaphysician's subject matter can be...properly identified with substance as the nuclear realisation of being *qua* being'.²⁸⁶ MacKinnon understands 'substance' within the divisions given in the *Categories*, a project that requires an open-ended empiricism inspired by observation. For him, Aristotelian metaphysics seeks to relate this experimentation to the ultimate causes of particularities, including *ousia*. MacKinnon articulates the contemporaneity of this project by juxtaposing it with G. E. Moore's essay on external and internal relations.²⁸⁷ This essay, as biographical details make clear,²⁸⁸ was instrumental in MacKinnon's turn towards philosophical realism, and so its appearance is not arbitrary. Encapsulating Moore's rather dense argument, one could say that he sought to

²⁸⁵ For accounts of Aristotelian metaphysics (which is an unwieldy and profuse topic of discussion), see Jonathan Barnes, 'Metaphysics,' in Jonathan Barnes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 66-108; Thomas De Koninck, 'Aristotle on God as Thought Thinking Itself', *The Review of Metaphysics* 47.3 (1994): 471-515; André De Muralt, 'La genèse de la métaphysique, La primauté de l'être en perspective aristotélicienne', *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 13 (1963): 184-205; Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 247-320; Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in Aristotelian Metaphysics: A Study in the Greek Background of Mediaeval Thought* (3rd ed., Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), esp. 455-473; Eric D. Perl, *Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 73-106. For an account of his aporetic ontology, see Edward Booth, O. P., *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Thinkers* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-35.

²⁸⁶ Donald MacKinnon, 'Aristotle's Conception of Substance,' in R. Bambrough (ed.), *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), 97-119 (pp. 97-98). Elsewhere, MacKinnon has said that 'Because substance is for Aristotle the nuclear realisation of being, he alternates between characterising the subject-matter of metaphysics as substance or being *qua* being'. For this reference, see MacKinnon, 'Substance' in Christology: A Cross-Bench View (1972),' in John McDowell (ed.), *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty: A Donald MacKinnon Reader* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 239. On Aristotle's theory of substance more generally, see Pierre Aubenque, 'Sur l'ambivalence du concept aristotélicien de substance,' in Nestor L. Cordero (ed.), *Ontologie et Dialogue: Mélanges en Hommage à Pierre Aubenque* (Paris: Vrin, 2000), 93-106; Robert Sokolowski, 'Matter, Elements and Substance in Aristotle', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 8.3 (1970): 263-288. For a critique of this idea of nuclear focality, see Enrico Berti, 'Multiplicity and Unity of Being in Aristotle', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 101 (2001): 185-207 and Heike Seifrin-Weis, 'Pros hen and the Foundations of Aristotelian Metaphysics', *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2009): 261-285.

²⁸⁷ G. E. Moore, 'External and Internal Relations,' in *Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), 276-309.

²⁸⁸ Cf. André Müller, *Donald M. MacKinnon (1913-94): An Intellectual Biography* (forthcoming). I thank André for giving me access to these texts. In this regard, one should also mention that MacKinnon once said that 'Moore made it possible for me to be a realist...for the logical atomist, there were things with which men [sic] were coming to terms; the world was not simply an expression of their immanent rationality, but something given (MacKinnon, 'Philosophy and Christology,' in *Borderlands of Theology*, 63).

critique the idealism of F. H. Bradley, and in particular the proposal that all relations are ‘intrinsic’, in the sense that all relational propositions are ‘internal’ to their logical object. The problem of such universalized relations is that it disallows any excessiveness or externality within the world of objects, since every procedure of interrelation between objects or propositions is incorporated into their essential definition. It is a closed system. On this model, a lack of a relational property (not-*p*) necessarily entails the non-deducibility of a particular object (not-*A*).²⁸⁹ In other words, any predicate is metaphysically inseparable from its object. However, for Moore, deducibility is not limited to relational properties. Logically-speaking, nothing prevents us from discovering realities that exceed or are non-reducible to any supposed relational predicate. Things may exist without being defined or predetermined by something else. This move assists philosophical analytics insofar as it seeks to discover what each particular thing *is*, without its connection to anything else. Butler’s statement that ‘everything is what it is and not another thing’ was a reference-point for MacKinnon here.²⁹⁰ For instance, I may stop to examine a pear, but the pear is not changed through my examination of it, or (as Wallace Stevens would have it): ‘...The pears are not viols / Nudes or bottles. / They resemble nothing else...The shadows of the pears / Are blobs on the green cloth. / The pears are not seen / As the observer wills.’²⁹¹ Without this excessiveness, it is difficult to avoid monism and totalization, that is, a denial of ‘externality’, since all ‘external’ or contingent relations become ‘necessary’ conditions. For Moore, on the contrary, while ‘internal’ relations are ‘necessary’ for certain objects, ‘external’ relations are simply a question of facticity.²⁹² One cannot presuppose in every case that one relation implies the other, since the variables or (*f*)*x* of any predication indicates an openness to temporality, and therefore cannot be comprehensively prejudged.²⁹³ I can know certain truths without knowing others, and I can know all the propositions that make such a truth possible, without deducing the particular truth in question. Truths are the product of empirical discovery and case-by-case examination.

²⁸⁹ For a summary of MacKinnon’s understanding of Moore’s argument, see Rowan Williams, ‘Trinity and Ontology,’ in *On Christian Theology*, 148-154.

²⁹⁰ MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 171; 253. The quotation can be found in the preface to the *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*. For this reference, see Joseph Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*, (ed.) David E. White (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 44. This motto served as an epigraph for Moore’s own *Principia Ethica*.

²⁹¹ Wallace Stevens, ‘Study of Two Pears,’ in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), I.2-4; VI.1-4.

²⁹² See Moore, ‘External and Internal Relations,’ 302-303. The potential atomistic and positivistic outcomes of such a procedure should, however, also be emphasized, but they were, to a certain extent, questioned already by MacKinnon himself who spoke of ‘the logical mythology of ‘atomic propositions’ corresponding with ‘atomic facts’’. He nonetheless still emphasized the core of the argument that ‘there are a number of propositions of whose truth in the sense of correspondence we are assured which are genuinely independent one of another’ (MacKinnon, ‘Idealism and Realism: An Old Controversy Renewed,’ in *Explorations in Theology* 5 (London: SCM, 1979), 142).

²⁹³ Cf. MacKinnon, ‘Substance’ in Christology,’ 243-244 on this point.

This reveals why MacKinnon compares logical atomism to *ousia*. Since ‘substance’, or more specifically, ‘primary substance’, constitutes the first ‘category of being’ for Aristotle,²⁹⁴ it follows that what is ‘substantial exists of itself’, and that ‘whatever else there is, whatever fundamental modes of being there are, all are relative to substance’.²⁹⁵ The addition of accidents or ‘secondary substance’ to primary substance is essential thereafter for differentiations within the categories of knowledge. But a lingering question remains: ‘What is it that makes an individual thing an individual thing?’²⁹⁶ This remains a reoccurring node of contention within Aristotelian scholarship: according to one view ‘the individuating factor’ is the ‘bare substratum’ to which accidents added,²⁹⁷ and in another it is precisely the factor of ‘secondary substance’ that individuates the ‘substratum’. For MacKinnon, it is the latter perspective that is able to account for the ‘concrete realisations of the features of our world that in their severalty make up that world’.²⁹⁸ MacKinnon, however, believes there is a textual indeterminacy within Aristotle regarding ‘individuation’ that appears to say that we can have ‘primary substance’ as bare materiality without form. But he contends that individuation, in the mature Aristotelian perspective, is concerned rather with a concrete existent, with a determinate ‘this’ (τόδε τι²⁹⁹) that cannot be thought apart from material instantiation and form.³⁰⁰ As a result of this indeterminacy, it appears – paradoxically – that the hylomorphic compound is ontologically prior to what constitutes it.³⁰¹ There remains an aporia here, as MacKinnon notes, since there is a latent tendency somewhat to assert formalization at the expense of concreteness. One can see this tendency in Aristotle’s statement that ‘being is not the substance of anything’, meaning that existence (that something is) and essence (what something is) are quite different (*Posterior Analytics* II.7.92 b13-14).

The doctrine of substance, as MacKinnon summarizes, is ‘an attempt to lay the foundations of the doctrine of degrees of being at the level of the humdrum and the everyday’,³⁰² and so is

²⁹⁴ MacKinnon, ‘Aristotle’s Conception of Substance,’ 100.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 101. Cf. *Metaphysics* VII.1028a32-b2.

²⁹⁶ ‘Aristotle’s Conception of Substance,’ 102.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 104. One could potentially summarize the two perspectives above by saying that while the first is concerned with the question of what initiates the process of individuation, the second is concerned the result of the process itself.

²⁹⁹ For Aristotle, ‘The doctrine of a ‘this’ shows that the form is individual and is identified *per se* with the singular thing as its act’ (Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in Aristotelian Metaphysics*, 399).

³⁰⁰ However, MacKinnon went on to say a few years later (‘Substance’ in Christology,’ 240) that ‘there is no part of Aristotle’s ontology with which the modern reader finds himself less in sympathy than those parts in which he is exploring the principle of individuation. For the most part he seems to reduce it to a sheerly material factor, and to evacuate the uniqueness, for instance, of the individual person of the kind of significance we are tempted to attribute to it’.

³⁰¹ ‘Aristotle’s Conception of Substance,’ 104-106. Owens on this score says that for Aristotle ‘The Form must be kept as prior to and act of composite Entity and logical universal’ (*The Doctrine of Being in Aristotelian Metaphysics*, 393). ‘Entity’ is Owen’s translation of the term οὐσία, usually rendered as ‘substance’ in English.

³⁰² MacKinnon, ‘Aristotle’s Conception of Substance,’ 108.

the first within the categories of being. This should not lead us to confuse substance with a generic essence,³⁰³ since substance is tied to particularity.³⁰⁴ Nonetheless, ‘substance’ – not to be confused here with Locke’s ‘substratum’³⁰⁵ – is concerned with the question of what-is-the-case, and should therefore be related to facticity (as MacKinnon suggests). The ‘realism’ of such a position is important for him in that it serves to support the general trustworthiness of mental ‘reference’, the fundamental other-directedness of human thinking.³⁰⁶ Echoing the poet and theorist J. H. Prynne, one could say that Aristotle’s notion of ‘substance’ exhibits for MacKinnon both the qualities of ‘difficulty’ and ‘resistance’.³⁰⁷ The world is not merely of our making but surprises us in its novelty.

MacKinnon is aware that the relation between theology and ontology within Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* remains tricky: is metaphysics primarily theological? Or are they distinct sciences? Both of these remain debated questions within scholarship (up to the present day). MacKinnon thinks that Aristotle’s reflections on ‘substance’ cannot be separated from his thoughts on the Unmoved Mover, and that his ‘ontology’ is inextricably concerned with the interrelation between particularity and universality (a theme that is particularly important for Christian theology, as can be seen in the ancient debates regarding the ὁμοούσιος).³⁰⁸ Such sentiments seem to underscore for Aristotle, in distinction from more modern treatments, that ‘metaphysics’ cannot be separated from ‘first philosophy’. As has been suggested already, the subordination of theology-as-first philosophy to the science of being *qua* being remains problematic for Christian orthodoxy.³⁰⁹ But whether Aristotle ultimately makes this onto-theological move is, however, subject to continuing speculation.³¹⁰

³⁰³ Ibid., 115: ‘Although primary substance, that is substance in the sense of self-existence, is prior to essence, yet without essence the self-existent lacks that which renders it determinate.’

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 109.

³⁰⁵ MacKinnon thinks (‘Aristotle’s Conception of Substance,’ 114) that Locke’s notion of the ‘substratum’ has led to a wide misinterpretation of Aristotle’s doctrine of substance. He considers Aristotle’s own teaching to be more subtle and open-ended. On the translation of οὐσία, *substantia*, and *essentia*, Joseph Owens writes ‘The English word ‘substance’ is...unsatisfactory as a rendition of the Greek term...’ ‘Substance’ fails to express the direct relation with Being denoted by οὐσία. It can be, moreover, very misleading. Because of Locke’s influence, ‘substance’ in English philosophical usage strongly suggests exactly what its etymology designates. It conjures up the notion of something ‘standing under’ something else. The background is the view of accidents ridiculed by Malebranche. Such a perspective inevitably falsifies the Aristotelian οὐσία and ends up reifying the accidents as in Locke’ (Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in Aristotelian Metaphysics*, 144). Eric Perl suggests that we translate *ousia* with the word ‘reality’ (cf. Perl, *Thinking Being*, 82-89).

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 110.

³⁰⁷ J. H. Prynne, ‘Resistance and Difficulty’. *Prospect* 5 (Winter 1961): 26-30.

³⁰⁸ ‘Aristotle’s Conception of Substance,’ 111-114. For more on this generally, see MacKinnon, ‘‘Substance’ in Christology,’ 237-254.

³⁰⁹ For a thorough discussion of this question (viz. the relation between the metaphysics of being and theology within Aristotle’s corpus), one can consult, Pierre Aubenque, ‘The Science without a Name’. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 29.2 (2008): 5-50; Shane Duarte, ‘Aristotle’s Theology and its Relation to the Science of Being *qua* Being’. *Apeiron* 40.3 (2007): 267-318; Günther Patzig, ‘Theology and Ontology in Aristotle’s Metaphysics,’ in Jonathan Barnes, Malcolm Schofield, and Richard Sorabji

The above excursion has shown that MacKinnon's reading of Aristotle aims to incorporate, though not uncritically, the latter's *aporetics* within a larger project of descriptive and realist metaphysics. Aristotle's 'particularism' had resonance for him since it proffered an empirical engagement with the world that resisted the grand narratives of idealism.³¹¹ It also provided a fecund comparison with contemporary theories of logical atomism. That said, however, MacKinnon's particularism should not be overly-emphasized. As André Müller has argued, already in the *Signpost* pamphlets,³¹² MacKinnon placed empiricism within a broader universalizing thrust, without which no 'particular' could be rightly understood. This means that any attention to particularity required an attention to its wider context (MacKinnon had learned the lessons of Hegel).

But some disquiet can be admitted regarding MacKinnon's appropriation of Aristotle. For some, the paring of Aristotle and Moore exhibits MacKinnon's 'residual tenderness' towards 'atomist realism', which (as Rowan Williams has suggested³¹³) has a trouble in accounting for the constructive element of discovery, and displays an overly 'modern' theory of subject-object dichotomy. It tacitly works with an idea of objects existing *out there*, existing as brute facts or stable essences just waiting to be discovered. As we will see later, MacKinnon desires to overcome such duality, in a blending of *creativity* with *discovery*, but his appropriation of Moore at this point probably does not help his cause. His position has difficulty accounting for a stronger interrelation between the observer and the observed, between mind and world. Ultimately here, MacKinnon appears to rely too much on what has come to be called 'the

(eds.), *Articles on Aristotle*, vol. 3 (London: Duckworth, 1979), 33-49; Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in Aristotelian Metaphysics*, *passim*.

³¹⁰ The post-Heideggerian equation of 'metaphysics' with 'ontotheology' is important to note, but Aristotle should probably be excluded from it since for him the science of being *qua* being still concerns separate or divine being and therefore does not place God within the category of 'being-in-general'. For the arguments and history of this debate, see René Lefebvre, 'L'image onto-théologique de la "Métaphysique" d'Aristote'. *Revue de Philosophie Ancienne* 8.2 (1990): 123-172; Olivier Boulnois, 'Quand commence l'ontothéologie? Aristote, Thomas d'Aquin et Duns Scot'. *Revue Thomiste* 95 (1995): 85-108; Enrico Berti, 'La "métaphysique" d'Aristote: "onto-théologie" ou "philosophie première"?' *Revue de Philosophie Ancienne* 14.1 (1996): 61-85; Jean-François Courtine, *Inventio analogiae: Métaphysique et ontothéologie* (Paris: Vrin, 2005), 45-99.

³¹¹ Cf. Stewart R. Sutherland, 'Donald MacKenzie MacKinnon, 1913-1994'. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 97 (1998): 381-389: 'He constantly stressed the importance of the particular and the individual against the possibility of the grand over-arching theory...He saw the individual example, assembled with others as reminders; in the end he was more in sympathy with Aristotle than Plato' (p. 388). Joseph Owens writes in similar terms that 'Aristotle's procedure is to let *things* speak for themselves. He waits for them to reveal their own inner nature. They show themselves to be the same in some ways, to be different in others. Concepts and words simply follow and reflect as best they can the nature of things themselves' (Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in Aristotelian Metaphysics*, 131).

³¹² Donald MacKinnon, *God the Living and the True* (London: Dacre Press, 1940); MacKinnon, *The Church of God* (London: Dacre Press, 1940). Thanks are due again for André Müller for his generous responses to my emails.

³¹³ Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology,' 154.

myth of the given'.³¹⁴ Milbank similarly states that in order 'to maintain [the] distinguishability [of things], one needs to say that entities may be relatively discrete, relatively indifferent to certain relations in which they may fall'. But one must also add that 'even such indifference, such 'resistance', can help negatively to determine what they are and what they become.'³¹⁵ MacKinnon's objectivism, on these accounts, appears to render 'substance' as simply a continuum of stabilized objects that exist apart linguistic description, leaving the impression that we are dealing simply with discrete items of knowledge that exist without any necessary connection to intelligent formation. In the words of Graham Ward, the idea that 'the world' (or 'substance' in our case) simply 'asserts its own reality', is predicated upon an 'atomism' in which 'ultimate reality is found in the independence of each atom asserting its own self-enclosed being'³¹⁶ – a belief which engenders a primacy of the individual, as Ward also makes clear.

There are also lingering questions about the coherency of Aristotle's project in relation to Christian metaphysics, since Aristotle's account of individuation (as scholars such as Adrian Pabst have argued³¹⁷) denies a relation between the Prime Mover and the individuation of material being. God is understood here as having a 'final' causal relation to being, but is absolved from its 'formal', 'material' constitution, and even (potentially) its 'efficient' causality.³¹⁸ These concerns are echoed by Philipp Rosemann who argues that Aristotle's notion of 'form' lacks an openness to historical development, and has difficulty explaining vertical causality within the cosmological hierarchy.³¹⁹ Milbank says that Aristotle 'thought that the *eidē* were perfectly stable within the material, temporal world, without participation

³¹⁴ Wilfrid Sellars, 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,' in Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (eds.), *The Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*. Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. I, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), 253-329.

³¹⁵ Milbank, 'A Critique of the Theology of Right,' 19-20.

³¹⁶ Graham Ward, 'Transcorporality: The Ontological Scandal'. *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 80. 3 (1998): 235-252. The quote is on p. 241. Such tendencies do not alleviate but rather further supplement the contention that MacKinnon's metaphysics entails the outgrowth of a liberal politics.

³¹⁷ Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy*, 9-24.

³¹⁸ 'The derivation of plurality from unity does not appear as a problem in Aristotle. The problem is merely to reduce the plurality to a unity sufficient for a science. Nor does the series of generations and corruptions require or even allow a temporally first *efficient* cause. The series of generations is *of its nature* eternal. It requires a first an unchangeable mover to account for its eternity. But in the *Metaphysics* that immovable mover functions only as a *final* cause' (Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in Aristotelian Metaphysics*, 468). For more on this debate, see David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 24-44; Enrico Berti, 'The Finality of Aristotle's Unmoved Mover in the *Metaphysics* Book 12, Chapters 7 and 10'. *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, 10.3 (2012): 863-76; For more on Aristotle's theory of motion in general, see Rémi Brague, 'Aristotle's Definition of Motion and its Ontological Implications'. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 13.2 (1990): 1-22 and Sarah Broadie, 'Que fait le premier moteur d'Aristote? (Sur la théologie du livre lambda de la «Métaphysique »). *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 183.2 (1993): 375-411.

³¹⁹ Philipp W. Rosemann, *Omne Agens Agit Sibi Simile: A "Repetition" of Scholastic Metaphysics*. Louvain Philosophical Studies 12 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996), 63-67.

in transcendence'.³²⁰ The obvious problems this makes for any analogical relating of divine to created being are clear, since particularities are *not* intrinsically related to their transcendent source.

It seems plausible to suggest then that MacKinnon's appropriation of Aristotle, against his intentions to correct dogmatic Kantianism, might actually hinder him from tracing those ontological intimacies between created and uncreated being that a more Catholic account of analogical participation might espouse. To be sure, MacKinnon might have been perfectly happy with this because, as we have seen,³²¹ he remained somewhat uncomfortable with 'analogy', since it ran the risk of metaphysical domestication. But what our investigation has shown is that MacKinnon and Aristotle are even closer in their substantial positions than first appears. Both emphasise particularity and empirical discovery, as manifest in Aristotle's thoughts on substance and the multiple modes of being, and in MacKinnon's atomist realism and pluralist metaphysic. Aristotle struggles to comprehend an individuation that is relational and historical, while MacKinnon leans towards an 'objectivism' that has difficulty (at least *prima facie*) in accounting for the constructive element of perception. Both also have difficulties relating finite being to infinite being: Aristotle has no account of creation, while MacKinnon (like Aristotle³²²) denies analogical participation, as we will see shortly.

But what is salient for our purposes is the way that Aristotelian ontology remains unclear in answering the question of the Prime Mover's relation to materiality. In a similar way, one could ask whether MacKinnon's suspicions of analogy create problems as regards the ontological connection between God and created being, and moreover, how contingency is reflective of divine infinity. Lacking a notion of analogical participation, the immanent order becomes empty of intrinsic divine signification, while God's action comes to be viewed as an

³²⁰ Milbank, 'The Thomistic Telescope,' 195.

³²¹ *The Problem of Metaphysics*, 14-16.

³²² On Aristotle's account of analogy, see Thomas M. Olszewsky, 'Aristotle's Use of Analogia'. *Apeiron* 2.2 (1968): 1-10; M.-D Phillipe, 'Analogon and Analogia in the Philosophy of Aristotle'. *The Thomist* 33.1 (1969): 1-74. A significant amount of continental research into Aristotle suggests that the 'analogy of being' is *not* traceable to Aristotle but rather to the Neoplatonic School and their theory of participation. This begins with Aristotle's commentators, namely with Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Simplicius. On this see, Pierre Aubenque, 'The Origins of the Doctrine of the Analogy of Being: On the History of a Misunderstanding'. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 11.1 (1986): 35-46; Aubenque, 'Sur la naissance de la doctrine pseudo-aristotélicienne de l'analogie de l'être'. *Les Études philosophiques* 3-4 (1989): 291-304; Alain de Libera, 'Les sources gréco-arabes de la théorie médiévale de l'analogie de l'être'. *Les Études philosophiques* 3-4 (1989): 319-345; Libera, 'Analogy,' in Barbara Cassin (ed.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 31-33; Jean-François Courtine, 'Différence ontologique et analogie de l'être,' in Burkhard Mojsisch and Olaf Pluta (eds.), *Historia Philosophiae Medii Aevi: Studien zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters*, Band 1 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: B. R. Grüner, 1991), 163-179; Courtine, *Inventio analogiae: Métaphysique et ontothéologie* (Paris: Vrin, 2005), 103-239; Joël Lonfat, 'Archéologie de la notion d'analogie d'Aristote à Saint Thomas d'Aquin'. *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 72.1 (2004): 35-107. However, also see Matthew Wood, 'Aristotelian Ontology and its Contemporary Appropriation: Some Thoughts on the Concept of Analogy'. *Dionysius* 31 (2013): 25-41 and Christian Rutten, 'L'analogie chez Aristote'. *Revue de Philosophie Ancienne* 1.1 (1983): 31-48.

external ‘intervention’ in the created order. Yet by construing things so, it becomes hard to avoid the charge of theological domestication, since God is construed here as a spatialised and ontic being – ontologically greater, but still *within* the realm of finite causes, since God remains ‘outside’ and contrasted with finitude. MacKinnon misconstrues theological analogy as endangering transcendence, whereas the analogy of being (since Lateran IV) has been conceptualized as a *negative* theology. Thus to avoid ‘anthropomorphism’, one actually *needs* analogical participation to steer through the pitfalls of hyper-transcendence and pantheistic reduction (as Erich Przywara cogently argued³²³). Finally, MacKinnon’s apparent dis-ease with Platonic *methexis* and his agreement with ‘the Third Man Argument’ have their own problems. Gregory Vlastos has argued,³²⁴ after repeating a presentation of the critique of Forms in *Parmenides*, that infinite regression is not applicable to Platonic metaphysics. While the ‘separation’ (χωρισμός) between ‘appearances’ and their transcendent ‘forms’ is certainly Platonic, an asseveration within the forms themselves is not supported by the mature Plato (as confirmed by Alexander Nehemas).³²⁵ From this it is suggested that while Aristotle’s critique of the Platonic ideas is damaging to a certain Platonism, such criticisms were anticipated by Plato himself.

We still need to explore some other reasons why MacKinnon had reservations regarding analogical participation. He did not always have such reservations: some of his earlier texts have an explicit openness to Thomistic accounts of analogy. However, there does appear to be a progressive weakening of its hold in his thinking, for reasons that seem primarily Kantian in origin. This story needs to be traced further to make sense of this change.

5.2. Kant’s Agnosticism: The De-Ontologizing of Analogy

Kant’s presence in MacKinnon’s corpus is widely apparent.³²⁶ It is the goal of this section to give background to MacKinnon’s reception of Kantian ideas anterior to and around the time

³²³ Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis. Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2013).

³²⁴ Gregory Vlastos, ‘The Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides*’. *The Philosophical Review* 63.3 (1954): 319-349.

³²⁵ Alexander Nehemas, in ‘Participation and Predication in Plato’s Later Thought’. *The Review of Metaphysics* 36.2 (1982): 343-374.

³²⁶ Donald MacKinnon, ‘Kant’s Agnosticism (1947),’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 27-34; MacKinnon, ‘Metaphysical and Religious Language (1954),’ in *Borderlands of Theology*, 207-221; MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 69-177; MacKinnon, ‘P. F. Strawson’s *The Bounds of Sense*,’ in *Borderlands of Theology*, 249-256; MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics*, 53-72; MacKinnon, ‘Coleridge and Kant,’ in John B. Beer (ed.), *Coleridge’s Variety: Bicentenary Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 183-203; MacKinnon, ‘Kant’s Philosophy of Religion’. *Philosophy* 50 (1975): 131-44; MacKinnon, ‘Some Reflections on Time and Space,’ in *Themes in Theology: The Threefold Cord: Essays in Philosophy, Politics and Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 40-49; MacKinnon, ‘Aspects of Kant’s Influence on British Theology (1990),’ in George. Macdonald Ross

of the Gifford Lectures, with a particular focus on its influence on his account of analogy. At this stage, the weight of commentary lies on those texts in which Kantian metaphysics is prominent, while bearing in mind that MacKinnon viewed Kant's ethics and metaphysics as being holistically entwined (since for Kant 'ethics and religion are *almost* identified'³²⁷). My focus now is to show that MacKinnon's digestion of Kantian scepticism played an integral role in his own project, and contributed to a gradual disinvestment in analogical metaphysics, a process that occurs gradually through a permeation of Kantian criticism, as well as a residual anti-Platonism that rejected 'existence' as a predicate of things. For Kant, 'being' was merely the product of a judgement that something existed, and was not a trait added onto 'essence'. Something either exists or it does not: ascribing 'being' to its 'essence' is simply pleonastic. With this assumption at hand, the idea that one could ascribe degrees of being or talk about an analogical participation in being is rendered nonsensical. The so-called analogy of attribution (*analogia attributionis*), central to Aquinas's metaphysics, is excluded outright.

In a *Signpost* pamphlet, MacKinnon wrote that Kant had bequeathed 'relativism'³²⁸ into Western thinking, particularly in the doctrine of categories.³²⁹ Such a tradition seemed to occlude the awareness that our finitude might be dependent on, and answerable to, a higher order of accountability. On this score, MacKinnon said that the task of metaphysics was to indicate an 'ultimate' which relativizes contingent and limited perspectives. Here MacKinnon expressed admiration for the doctrine of analogy as a 'formal schematization in metaphysical terms of the creature-creator relation', and open to a 'dynamical' and even the 'dialectical' nature of this engagement. It acknowledged that creaturely 'likeness' could only be understood within a greater 'unlikeness' (here echoing the *maior dissimilitudo* of Lateran IV).³³⁰ In a piece written around the same period,³³¹ MacKinnon sought to recover 'metaphysics' within the debates of phenomenalism and logical positivism. MacKinnon was concerned here to demonstrate the limitations of focusing only on what physical sensation gives us. For him, metaphysics provides us with an encompassing matrix into which physical

and Tony McWalter (eds.), *Kant and His Influence* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 348-66.

³²⁷ 'Metaphysical and Religious Language,' 219.

³²⁸ Cf. *God, the Living and the True*. See especially the sections entitled 'The Paradox of Revelation' and 'Renewal of Understanding'. This specific quotation can be found in Donald MacKinnon, *Kenotic Ecclesiology: Select Writings of Donald M. MacKinnon*, (eds.) John C. McDowell and Scott Kirkland (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2016), 57.

³²⁹ While maintaining a transcendental deduction of the categories, Kant nevertheless advanced a form of the correspondence theory of truth. Cf. Kant, *The Critique of Reason*, A820-821= B848-849. MacKinnon himself held to a version of this idea (though not uncritically). On this, see MacKinnon, 'The Christian Understanding of Truth,' in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 35-43.

³³⁰ MacKinnon, *Kenotic Ecclesiology*, 80.

³³¹ MacKinnon, 'What is a Metaphysical Statement?' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 41 (1940-1941): 1-26.

sensations are to be placed, apart from which they lose sensibility.³³² He provided a critique of the positivist tradition, attempting to show that metaphysics cannot be written off as an ‘impossible’ enterprise (as A. J. Ayer would have it³³³). Instead, metaphysics is required for the preservation a moral and intellectual integrity.³³⁴ MacKinnon’s point here is that without some kind of metaphysical compass, moral positions have no deeper basis in reality as such, beyond the conclusion that they are just mental impositions. This idealistic deduction stands in contrast to a ‘pluralist metaphysics’ that attends to the particular and to the irreducibly different kinds of ‘facts’ that appear in the world. Following Aristotle, MacKinnon stated that the ‘pluralist metaphysician’ is concerned with conceptualizing ‘the self-subsistent’³³⁵ and ‘the reality of the individual’.³³⁶ Such a metaphysician seeks to emulate a ‘healthy respect for the particularity of the individual, which continually militates against that besetting philosophical sin of reducing types of entity to terms of one another.’³³⁷ Once more, Moore’s critique of Bradley lingers in the background. Especially important for MacKinnon here is how an idealist or monistic metaphysics struggle to account for the specificities of selfhood and created particularity, while a pluralist metaphysic, on the contrary, could do so. Furthermore, pluralism makes space for ‘analogical’ thinking, in the Aristotelian sense of making comparisons between different modes of being, rather than the Thomistic account of analogical participation as such.³³⁸ Following on from this anti-idealism, MacKinnon sought to wrestle with ‘phenomenalism’ and specifically the influence of Kant on this tradition.³³⁹ Kant proposed that experiences only occur within *a priori* structures,³⁴⁰ apart from which any notion of ‘experience’ as becomes unintelligible, a move which has affinities to the idea of a

³³² Ibid., 24.

³³³ MacKinnon has in mind here the tradition of positivism that saw any form of metaphysical inquiry as an inherently contradictory and incoherent way of speaking. Because it has no logical referent which can be conclusively demonstrated or tested, verified or falsified, metaphysics is viewed, from a semantic viewpoint, as being ultimately meaningless. The classic text for this argument is A. J. Ayer, ‘Demonstration of the Impossibility of Metaphysics’, *Mind* 43.171 (1934): 335-345. The continuing importance of Ayer’s criticisms of metaphysics within MacKinnon’s theology can be seen in MacKinnon, ‘Ayer’s Attack on Metaphysics,’ in A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.), *A. J. Ayer: Memorial Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 49-61.

³³⁴ ‘What is a Metaphysical Statement,’ 25.

³³⁵ Ibid., 20.

³³⁶ Ibid., 18.

³³⁷ Ibid., 14. Also cf. *The Problem of Metaphysics*, 134-135: ‘The pluralist will always insist that it is better to attempt an inventory of the different sorts of things there in the world, and eschew any attempt at premature reduction, than seek to reveal the irreducibly diverse as in their diversity somehow expressive of a unitary whole’.

³³⁸ ‘What is a Metaphysical Statement,’ 21.

³³⁹ The influence of Kant on the phenomenology is well-known, but has been traced by André De Muralt, ‘The ‘Founded Act’ and The Apperception of Others: The Actual Scholastic Sources of Husserlian Intentionality. An Essay in Structural Analysis of Doctrines,’ in Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (ed.), *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook Of Phenomenological Research*, vol. VI (Dordrecht: Springer, 1977), 123-141.

³⁴⁰ MacKinnon himself wrote a contribution to a symposium on *a priori* concepts. His perspective can be found in MacKinnon, ‘Are There *A Priori* Concepts?’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes 18 (1939): 49-54.

‘charmed circle’, since it is precisely through transcendently-deduced categories that ‘experience’ is conceived.³⁴¹ The importance of these aprioristic structures is inseparably tied to subjectivity and the question of freedom.³⁴²

Kant’s doctrine of categories – as a mode of structuring human experience within certain limits – remains important for MacKinnon decades before the Gifford Lectures. But what is interesting to note at this stage is MacKinnon’s openness towards ‘Catholic’ modes of analogical thinking. For instance, in ‘The Function of Philosophy in Education (1941)’, he affirms that ‘we are metaphysical animals, naturally curious, with minds open to comprehend the analogy of our being with that of our Creator’.³⁴³ In another essay from the same year, he has many positive things to say about this: ‘The process of analogical thinking whereby the human understanding schematizes to itself the dependence of all things on the sovereign will of the Creator, who called them de nihilo is complicated and subtle, yet the ultimate insight of the doctrine of that what is, depends utterly upon God for its being, but is utterly unnecessary to Him for His’. He concludes that ‘St. Thomas was right in his insistence on the ultimacy of ontology’, and that ‘Only if we are prepared to admit that analogy of being...can we hope in any sense...to achieve theology’.³⁴⁴ MacKinnon concurs that the *analogia entis* is a manifestation of ‘Thomist agnosticism’, and he understands well that for this theology ‘The *via negativa* inevitably precedes the *via eminentiae* in the ordered process of our thought of God. Only thus can the worse of Kantian antinomies be avoided’. But he also stresses that we ‘can and must affirm a radical discontinuity between God and man’.³⁴⁵ Under the influence of Jacques Maritain, MacKinnon seeks to connect the analogical, as regards divine-human relations, to the human self-reflection of a ‘moral agent’ in which we try to grasp the ‘unity’ of our ‘nature’ as a kind of ‘norm’. For MacKinnon, to be sure, ‘The character of that norm may be very obscurely grasped’, since ‘its character [is] analogical, capable of a multiplicity of diverse realizations in modes proportionate to a multiplicity of divergent historical situations’. But ‘it is only in and through an act of specifically metaphysical (that is analogical) thought that man [sic] can thus achieve the concept of his ‘nature’ whether or no [sic] the impulse to perform that act be derived from acceptance of the Gospel’.³⁴⁶ This is part of MacKinnon’s ‘Catholic’ (and also Butlerian) attempt to connect moral reflection to ‘the

³⁴¹ What is a Metaphysical Statement, ‘ 22.

³⁴² Ibid., 23. Kant himself argued for a transcendental deduction of freedom which should be adduced *a priori*, and could only operate on the very assumption of its truth, being prior to any empirical demonstration. On this, cf. Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, A532- 558 = B560-586, and also, cf. Immanuel Kant, *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4: 446-463.

³⁴³ MacKinnon, ‘The Function of Philosophy in Education (1941)’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 14.

³⁴⁴ MacKinnon, ‘Revelation and Social Justice [1941],’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 140.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 140

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 141.

ethical importance of desire', and constitutes a critique of the deontological tradition which attempted to articulate an 'abstract moralism'³⁴⁷ apart from our created and historical constitution. Thus regarding the task of metaphysics, he says that it is not an 'achievement of a theoretically satisfying system, such as certain forms of monism have claimed to provide. It was the derivation of the contingent from the necessary, but the question of why the necessary should thus have generated the contingent remained always unanswered'. He goes on to say that

We are utterly unnecessary for [God], we cannot make our existence (unless we deny its character) a matter of any necessity whatsoever, yet we cannot deny that through revelation the character of our relation to God is profoundly illuminated by the disclosure in an act, that is necessary to its achievement, of His relation to us...if we refuse to allow that, in any sense, the schematization in analogical terms of the whole creature-creator relation is possible we will inevitably restrict the sphere of that relation. Unless one supposes that relation is grounded ontologically, one will put the *Anknüpfungspunkt* of creature and creator in some isolated capacity of the former, whose relation to his whole nature is not clearly definable. Students of Kantian philosophy will remember that at the last the problem of the relation of the phenomenal and noumenal self is unsolved.³⁴⁸

The last line is revealing: it appears to show that MacKinnon considers the *analogia entis*, at this juncture of his development, to be a metaphysical alternative to Kantian phenomenology. This shows that MacKinnon already was by no means a dogmatic Kantian. But in addition to Kant, attention should also be directed to the fact that Barth – as mediated through his debate with Brunner – already had a significant influence on MacKinnon (as the reference to the *Anknüpfungspunkt* shows). He overtly states that 'I incline somewhat in a Barthian direction myself', thereby affirming the Lutheran-Reformed perspective that 'nature...is wounded almost beyond recognition'.³⁴⁹ What these passages show is that MacKinnon was trying to articulate a *via media* between two agnosticisms: on the one hand, the epistemological strictures of Kant and Barth,³⁵⁰ and on the other, the apophatics of Thomas.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 143.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 141-142.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 142.

³⁵⁰ It goes without saying that Barth himself was heavily influenced in his theological methodology by Kantian transcendentalism as kind of negative fold to his account of divine self-revelation. On this, see Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 465-466, and *passim*.

A few years after this (1947), MacKinnon wrote an essay detailing the importance of Kant for theology.³⁵¹ His intention was to recover Kantian (and Thomistic) agnosticism against the ‘Hegelian absolutism’ then making its appearance within British thought. In MacKinnon’s perspective, Kant is important for his implicit *negative* mode of metaphysical inquiry, insofar as he emphasised the limits posed for sensibility as it approximated ‘the unconditioned’.³⁵² This inquiry is constantly renewed in view of our time-bound consciousness³⁵³ – a move that is a part of MacKinnon’s attempt to ‘historicize’ Kantian transcendentalism (à la Hegel, Dilthey, Collingwood, and Cassirer).³⁵⁴ Much like we have seen elsewhere, MacKinnon sees delimitation and categorisation as a central aspect of Kant’s metaphysics, especially in relation to human cognition.³⁵⁵ This is due to the fact that ‘discursive understanding and the schematized categories are by Kant conceived as the way in which human beings make response to their world. The world must answer to their demand – that we know, for otherwise the world would not be our world as the object of our theoretical understanding’.³⁵⁶ For Kant, metaphysics is ‘primarily an extension of theoretical questioning’, because human beings are continually ‘beset by ultimate questions. They cannot easily rest, they ask questions which cannot be settled by any mere extension of their theoretical understanding’.³⁵⁷

However, the movement towards ‘the unconditioned’ is reflected for Kant not primarily within theoretical abstraction, but in *the claims of the ethical*.³⁵⁸ This touches upon MacKinnon’s metaphysics to the degree that Kant, in a manner more strident than Aquinas, placed a stronger emphasis on ‘the reality of morality’ (or so MacKinnon thinks), even though Thomas expounds a ‘deeper agnosticism’ which Kantians should learn from.³⁵⁹ But MacKinnon nonetheless says that if ‘Thomism, with its profound conception of analogy, is to help and illuminate the perplexities today it must take account of those whose sense of incompleteness, of duality, lies more at the level of conduct than understanding’.³⁶⁰ What should be marked here is that while there is still an appreciation for the doctrine of analogy, there seems to be a dampening of his earlier reception. The experience of conflict within the

³⁵¹ MacKinnon, ‘Kant’s Agnosticism (1947),’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 27-34. This essay was originally delivered at the Oxford Aquinas Society.

³⁵² For Kant, ‘the unconditioned’ can (at best) only be a regulative idea for pure reason, an ideal of which nothing concrete can be predicated, or metaphysically demonstrated. Apart from speculative theology, it can be presupposed only within the realm of practical and moral reason (cf. Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, A567-704= B595-732; A795-831=B823-859).

³⁵³ See MacKinnon, ‘Kant’s Agnosticism,’ 32-33.

³⁵⁴ I owe this point to André Müller, *Donald M. MacKinnon (1913-94): An Intellectual Biography* (forthcoming).

³⁵⁵ MacKinnon, ‘Kant’s Agnosticism,’ 29.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

moral life, existing against the risks of human responsibility, seems to temper his account towards a stronger feeling for the woundedness and limits of every human enterprise. And it is precisely within this claim of the ethical that transcendence enters worldly engagements, an opinion which is in accord with a Kantian conception of ‘the primacy of practical reason’.³⁶¹ Without attention to the particular, so MacKinnon thinks, the doctrine of analogy becomes abstract and formalist, unable to deal with historicity.

By the time we reach ‘Metaphysical and Religious Language’ (1954), there is a much more critical reception of Thomism. Clearly a cleavage has opened in the years between this text and the previous ones. In this paper, he understands Thomistic analogy as espousing an ‘analogically participated transcendental’, as a ‘fundamentally ontological’ concept rather than a purely logical one.³⁶² The influence of Kant here is explicit (and Barth too, though not with the same centrality³⁶³). He acknowledges that analogical language tries to avoid ‘the twin perils of anthropomorphism and agnosticism’, but in a *volte-face* MacKinnon states that it relies on out-dated assumptions: ‘we have to admit’, in relation to Thomism (and Platonism), ‘a kind of intuitive awareness of analogically participative being which we do not seem to have’.³⁶⁴ For MacKinnon, the doctrine of analogy seems untenable in a post-Enlightenment cosmos. Central to Kant’s ‘meta-metaphysics’ is his ‘theory of the *a priori*’ and the so-called ‘doctrine of categories’, which (following Paul Tillich) MacKinnon reads as a rendition of the ‘doctrine of human finitude’ as this emphasized ‘the peculiarly limited character of human knowledge’.³⁶⁵ Kant was concerned not to press ‘the tools of ordinary empirical knowledge’ towards grasping ‘the unconditioned’.³⁶⁶ Therefore, Kant expressed a ‘confidence in discarding the scheme of analogy’ since it ‘sprang in a way from a conviction that he was liberating the essence of religion from a false entanglement with metaphysics’.³⁶⁷ MacKinnon’s own worry is with the problem of ‘intuition’ since ‘if we claim intuitively to see things as they are, we are unwilling to give proper attention to those who bid us revise our assumptions, change our frames of reference and so on’. He even speaks of ‘the perilous mythology of a faculty of intuition’,³⁶⁸ and ‘the tyranny that metaphysical conviction can exert over the proper assimilation of new insights concerning the ways of human knowing’,

³⁶¹ MacKinnon is significantly influenced on this point by Forsyth, who seems to have, more than any other contemporary, pressed upon his thinking the pre-eminence of the practical.

³⁶² MacKinnon, ‘Metaphysical and Religious Language,’ 209. He also made clear, in a discussion with Anthony Flew, that he considered the ‘analogy of attribution’ to be more ‘fundamental’ than the ‘analogy of proper proportionality’. For this, see ‘Creation: A Dialogue between Anthony Flew and D. M. MacKinnon (1955),’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 223-235 (p. 232).

³⁶³ MacKinnon calls Barth in this same essay the ‘most deeply anti-metaphysical of modern theologians’ (‘Metaphysical and Religious Language’, 220).

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

³⁶⁵ ‘Metaphysical and Religious Language,’ 211.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 219.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

and produces a ‘canonizing as dogma some particular systematization of human knowledge’. Such assumptions can lead to ‘a false acceptance as final truth of that which in its nature is inevitably impermanent and relative’.³⁶⁹ This seems in-step with Aristotle’s critique of Plato, and most certainly is integral to MacKinnon’s critique of ideology more generally.³⁷⁰ Overall, it is the risk of intellectual or moral absolutism that MacKinnon finds worrying in regard to the *analogia entis*, since it appears to rely on outmoded forms of metaphysical intuitionism. Nonetheless, MacKinnon does say that while

Few of us find it easy to accept the principle on which the doctrine of analogy of being depends, that is the conception of being as an analogically participated transcendental; yet, we may be thankful for the statement of this doctrine as revealing something of what the problem of metaphysics is. We may even in certain moods envy those who can accept analogy as men [sic] who have at their disposal a supremely effective device for reconciling the logic of the familiar with that of the unfamiliar. The close understanding of the gulf between ordinary and transcendent description which we owe to Kant and his successors prohibits our acceptance of what scholastic analogy promises, and leaves us with the problem of the relation of settleable and unsettleable questions.³⁷¹

In a review of P.F. Strawson’s monograph of Kant (1966), MacKinnon expresses very similar views. He does not mention ‘analogy’ as such, but he does reiterate Kant’s critique of humanity’s ‘pretension to penetrate the secrets of the unconditioned’. Here Kant appears as a metaphysician of ‘experience’ and ‘an agnostic, whose delineation of the most pervasive features of the objective world is but a propaedeutic study to the definitive recognition of our ineradicable intellectual limitation’.³⁷² Elsewhere (in 1975), there is mention of ‘analogical representation’ in his essay on Kant’s philosophy of religion, which is here read as a form of ‘negative theology’. But here it seems that his reference to analogy is strongly tied to Kant’s phenomena-noumena division,³⁷³ as well as his accounts of analogical predication and schematism. This text seems to show that his earlier disquiet regarding Kant’s phenomenalism is suppressed somewhat, and that ‘analogy’ is being deployed as a method of relating the known to the unknown, but here within a transcendentalist division of phenomena from noumena. In Kant’s ‘negative theology’, we can know things only as they appear, and

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 212-213.

³⁷⁰ Cf. Nicholas Lash, ‘Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy,’ in Brian Heblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland (eds.), *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology: Essays Presented to D. M. MacKinnon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 68-94.

³⁷¹ ‘Metaphysical and Religious Language,’ 214-215.

³⁷² MacKinnon, ‘P. F. Strawson’s *The Bounds of Sense*,’ 253.

³⁷³ Cf. MacKinnon, ‘Kant’s Philosophy of Religion,’ 141.

are unable to conceive them within themselves. At best these are known as ‘a something = X’ (as Kant clearly says) and cannot even be cognized, but are understood as a correlate of the postulated unity of the sensible manifold. God too can only be thought (within the sphere of pure reason) as a ‘Something’ of which we cannot form any positive concepts.³⁷⁴ This is intrinsic to Kant’s transcendental sublime. What is apparent now is that Kant’s influence on MacKinnon, though not uncritically received, seems to have developed a stronger hold in his mature thinking. This conclusion stands despite even the strong influence of Catholic thinkers like Balthasar.

In an introductory essay on Balthasar (written in 1969, with a postscript dated 1974), MacKinnon speaks of the Swiss theologian’s ‘traditionalism’, namely, his Catholic ‘theological method which brought Christology into close, even perilously close, relation to ontological metaphysics’. MacKinnon does qualify this by saying that in Balthasar ‘Jesus Christ, and not being as such (an analogically participated transcendental), is the *Anknüpfungspunkt* between God and man’.³⁷⁵ This passage does seem to imply MacKinnon had nuanced his account of analogy towards a Balthasarian appreciation of the *analogia Christi*, in which the kenotic (and even tragic) particularity of Christ’s life is seen to trump any abstract, ontological analogy between God and being-as-such. This meant for MacKinnon that any ontology must deal with the blood-and-flesh materiality of the incarnation. But even here his reception of Balthasar’s Christology has a Kantian tinge. Firstly, he appears to read ‘being-as-such’ as a quantifier without qualities – a post-Scotist-Suárezian gesture in which ‘being’ is constructed as the pure *non-nihil*. Secondly, MacKinnon was keen to apply the concept of ‘limitation’ to the trinity, in a way that is distinctly Kantian. At one point he speaks of an ‘analogy of limits’ as applicable to the triune God in a comparable manner to the *analogia personarum*. His emphasis here is to ground *ad intra* the facticity and temporality of Christ’s life within the eternal life of the trinity.³⁷⁶ But as a later essay from 1986 reveals,³⁷⁷ ‘the concept of limitation’³⁷⁸ is deeply informed by Kant’s ‘doctrine of categories’, which he calls ‘a profound examination of the limitations of characteristically human knowledge’, even suggesting that Kant’s concept of free and determined ‘receptivity’ might have helped

³⁷⁴ Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, A250-251, A355, A619, A674-675, A698, B647, B702-703, B726.

³⁷⁵ MacKinnon, ‘A Master in Israel: Hans Urs von Balthasar,’ in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God*, trans. J. Halliburton (London: SPCK, 1975), 1-16 (p. 7).

³⁷⁶ MacKinnon, ‘The Relation of the Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity,’ in Richard W. A. McKinney (ed.), *Christ, Creation and Culture: Essays in Honour of T.F. Torrance* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 92-107, but esp. 104.

³⁷⁷ MacKinnon, ‘Some Reflections on Hans Urs Von Balthasar’s Christology with Special Reference to *Theodramatik* II/2 and III,’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 281-288.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 285.

Balthasar's conception of the intra-trinitarian relations.³⁷⁹ It is not negligible to remark here, once more, that Kant's theory of freedom and necessity is predicated on the transcendentalist division between the phenomena and noumena, and most certainly lies behind his idea of 'limitation' as well. Thirdly, we also know that by this stage that MacKinnon had accepted Kant's rejection of being-as-predicate. In an essay on Collingwood,³⁸⁰ and in unison with Ryle's agreement with Kant's critique of the ontological argument,³⁸¹ MacKinnon stated its crux:

to accept the ontological argument involves treating existence as a predicate, and failing to recognize that to say e.g. of tame tigers that they exist is something of a different order from saying that they growl. If we affirm that they exist, we are saying that the complex concept of tame-tiger-hood is exemplified; we are saying simply that animals of this sort are found in the world; we are not characterizing them as we are when we say that they growl. It is impossible to escape the conviction that Ryle is right and that the ontological argument is invalid inasmuch as it obliterates the distinction between characterization and affirmation of reality. *Existence is not a characteristic and must not be treated as such* [italics mine].³⁸²

The central thrust of Kant's rejection of Anselm centres on predication, and concerns this dilemma: is 'existence' related to or extraneous to 'essence'? The 'ontological argument' (a term not used by Anselm³⁸³) ascribed 'existence' to God on the basis of a concept of 'perfection'. Since our imagination can postulate a most perfect being, beyond which nothing greater can be thought, it follows that 'perfection' must include 'existence', because without 'existence' it would not be the most perfect being, since 'existence' is always more perfect than 'non-existence'. It is this logical step that Kant rejects because 'existence' is not something we add to 'essence'. It is – to use the language of G. E. Moore again – simply a question of facticity, that is, it is 'judgement' or a 'positing' about whether something exists or does not exist. If we say that 'being' is a predicate of 'essence', we would be engaging in tautology, a restatement of what is already there. In a salient passage, Kant argues thus:

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 287. MacKinnon's meaning is that Kant was someone whose theory of autonomy sought to address the opposition between determinism and pure spontaneity or creativity (a debate inflected by his reception of Cassirer's thinking). For this, see MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 69-177.

³⁸⁰ MacKinnon, 'Collingwood on the Philosophy of Religion'. *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 13 (1992): 73-83.

³⁸¹ Gilbert Ryle, 'Mr Collingwood and the Ontological Argument (1937),' in *Collected Papers, Volume 2: Collected Essays 1929-1968* (London and New York, Routledge, 2009), 105-119.

³⁸² 'Collingwood on the Philosophy of Religion,' 76.

³⁸³ Jean-Luc Marion, 'Is the Ontological Argument Ontological? The Argument According to Anselm and Its Metaphysical Interpretation According to Kant'. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 30.2 (1992): 201-218.

Being is obviously not a real predicate, i.e., a concept of something that could add to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing or of certain determinations in themselves. In the logical use it is merely the copula of a judgment. The proposition **God is omnipotent** contains two concepts that have their objects: God and omnipotence; the little word “**is**” is not a predicate in it, but only that which posits the predicate **in relation to** the subject. Now if I take the subject (God) together with all his predicates (among which omnipotence belongs), and say **God is**, or there is a God, then I add no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed posit the **object** in relation to my **concept**.³⁸⁴

Jaakko Hintikka has perceptively commented that Kant’s argument here ‘can be construed as criticizing the medieval and neo-Platonic ideas that existence *qua* existence carried with itself interesting attributes of which we can profitably theorize’, a problem which goes back to ‘Aristotle’s *aporia* concerning the science of being *qua* being’.³⁸⁵ Hintikka is presumably referring to the question of whether metaphysics is primarily a question of ‘being’ (τὸ ὄν) or ‘substance’ (οὐσία), and certainly has in mind the Stagirite’s assertion that ‘being is not the substance of anything’ (*Posterior Analytics* II.7.92 b13-14). For our purposes, what is important to notice is that if ‘being’ is the product of a ‘positing’ – a judgement of sheer ‘existence’ or ‘non-existence’ – then *participation* (*methexis*) in being or any analogical metaphysics is disallowed. Ontological participation requires an axiological account of being in which entities are thought to exist at different levels of intensity and actuality. The analogy of attribution (and especially Aquinas’s deployment of it) presupposes this account, since it necessitates the predication of one thing (Being) to different entities (God and creatures), without proposing a reality that exists prior to or apart from the entities in question, as if ‘being’ could be an independent ‘third’ entity. But without participation and ontological predication, MacKinnon would have to distance himself both from Platonism and Thomism, and any account of analogy that presupposed its insights. Such a move was further buttressed by his acceptance of Aristotle’s critique of *methexis*, Plato’s self-critique in *Parmenides*, and his own suspicion of the Platonic intuitionism that underpinned the *analogia entis*. We have already spoken of these a bit earlier and have suggested that these ripostes are by no means decisive, and (as we will now see) are in some sense undermined by MacKinnon himself.

In his mature thought, MacKinnon nuanced his critique of Plato in *PM*, without rejecting completely his earlier suspicions. He emphasized much more the *dialogical* rather than

³⁸⁴ Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, A598-599 = B626-637

³⁸⁵ Hintikka, ‘Kant on Existence, Predication, and the Ontological Argument,’ 132n.10.

dogmatic aspects of Plato's method, especially as regards the Socratic aspect of subjecting one's own viewpoints to a serious and even precarious interrogation. However, this nuancing does not mean that MacKinnon has substantially transgressed his earlier positions (cf. *PM*, 99). He is appreciative of the central problem of Plato's ontology of Forms, as this concerned the theorization of an ideal – as a 'standard metre' (Peter Geach) – which does not decrease or change with the progress of time (*PM*, 154-160); he also has a particular tenderness for the notion that 'ideas' can only be *discovered* and not *made* (since Plato was not a constructivist). Moreover, his affirmation of Plato's dialectics has connections to MacKinnon's repeated references to painting and art (e.g. Paul Cézanne and Paul Nash) as opening us to a 'truth' that exceeds naïve realism or representation. With this in mind, it does appear that MacKinnon's perspective makes allowance for *mediation*, in the sense that creativity is tied to a progressive un-concealment of reality. And behind this, there appears the half-suggestion (within the overall argument of *PM*) that Plato's dialectics might serve as a philosophical counterpart to Cézanne's aesthetics. However, one is still not clear whether MacKinnon comprehended this linkage, or ever saw how it undermined his original critique of the *analogia entis* that began in the 1950's, especially as this was premised on a rejection of an overly-confident and Platonic intellectual intuition. If he did, then he could be a step closer to its re-affirmation.

What can be gathered from the genealogy traced here is the gradual *de-ontologization* of analogy within MacKinnon's thought. Through the adoption of Kant's transcendentalism and his critique of Anselm, MacKinnon chastened and ultimately departed from his earlier acceptance of analogical participation. It is this Kantian influence which explains MacKinnon's movement away from his earlier more enthusiastic reception of Aquinas. If he does have a remaining openness to analogy, it is through a post-Barthian affirmation of the *analogia Christi* without the *analogia entis*. It is surprising that MacKinnon opted for this in spite of the influence of Catholic theologians, since what is clear for Balthasar and Przywara is that Christology remains the foundation of ontological analogy. Christ as the God-Man constitutes the 'concrete analogy of being' and is the paradigm for analogical participation more generally.³⁸⁶

So was this gradual rejection a necessary move on MacKinnon's part? Is there a positive appreciation of historicity and particularity within this tradition that MacKinnon has failed to discern? With perspicacity, MacKinnon did read the *analogia entis* as a participatory and ontological account of created being, and not just a semantic or logical account of language. Nevertheless, it is precisely this ontological version of the doctrine that he rejects. However, we cannot take this conclusion at face value, and should interrogate the reasons for it. For instance, MacKinnon (echoing the *Schulmetaphysik*) reads the *analogia entis* through the

³⁸⁶ Cf. Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 74-75n.5.

scholastic prism of *metaphysica generalis* and *metaphysica specialis* (a move connected to the invention of ontologically ‘neutral’ science³⁸⁷), and also through Kant’s critique of being-as-predicate (which is traceable to Scotism and Suárez).³⁸⁸ Because of this, one can see how ‘existence’ becomes prised from ‘essence’, and ‘being’ is transformed into a conceptually minimalist place-holder.³⁸⁹ On the one hand, this means that ‘existence’ does not reference anything more than the presence or absence of any particular thing, that is, anything apart from a sheer *happening*, since ‘being’ does not *add* anything of interest to our knowledge of particular entities. On this schema, ‘being’ is an undetermined X whose most transcendental structure is that it be *not nothing* and that it obeys non-contradiction. Such pliability allows for an unrestricted multiplicity of potential existents, but one in which their respective acts of being are conceptually univocal. On the other hand, the actualization within time of possible essences has no impact on their content, since ‘existence’ is already presupposed within their ‘essence’. Within this model, ‘essence’ is rendered static and unchangeable, unperturbed by the accretions and advancements of history because, once more, it presupposes that being-as-such is not a predicate of real things.³⁹⁰

It is also worth saying some points regarding Kant’s metaphysics and *apophatics*. Firstly, we are reminded of Milbank’s comments on Kant’s negative theology: since it is predicated on an unquestioned dogmatism regarding our access to the ‘noumena’, does it in the end really avoid transgressing the boundaries it has emphatically drawn? How can one survey the phenomenological borders without exceeding them at the same time? Costantino Esposito has

³⁸⁷ Cf. MacKinnon, ‘Finality in Metaphysics, Ethics and Theology,’ in *Explorations in Theology*, 99-115. On the genealogy of this division, and a sample of the scholarship that surrounds it, see Ernst Vollrath, ‘Die Gliederung der Metaphysik in eine Metaphysica generalis und eine Metaphysica specialis’. *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 16.2 (1962): 258-284; Marco Lamanna, ‘Mathematics, Abstraction and Ontology: Benet Perera and the Impossibility of a Neutral Science of Reality’. *Quaestio: Journal of the History of Metaphysics* 14 (2014): 69-89.

³⁸⁸ Hans Seigfried, ‘Kant’s Thesis about Being Anticipated by Suárez?’ in L.W. Beck (ed.), *Proceedings of the Third International Kant Congress* (Reidel, Dordrecht 1972), 510-520.; Costantino Esposito, ‘L’impensé de l’existence: Kant et la scolastique’. *Quaestio: Journal of the History of Metaphysics* 17 (2017): 259-276.

³⁸⁹ On the ‘scientific’ rationale for the metaphysical formalism of Scotus and Suárez, see Ludger Honnefelder, *Scientia transcendens. Die formale Bestimmung der Seiendheit und Realitat in der Metaphysik des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit (Duns Scotus – Suarez – Wolff – Kant – Peirce)*. «Paradeigmata 9» (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990), 3-294. On Kant’s Scotism, see Honnefelder, ‘Metaphysics as a Discipline: From the “Transcendental Philosophy of the Ancients” to Kant’s Notion of Transcendental Philosophy,’ in R. L. Friedman and L. O. Nielsen (eds.), *The Medieval Heritage in Early Modern Metaphysics and Modal Theory 1400-1700*. The New Synthese Historical Library 53 (Kluwer, Dordrecht-Boston-London 2003), 53-74; Honnefelder, *Scientia transcendens*, 443-459. Also see Jocelyn Benoist, ‘Jugement et existence chez Kant: Comment des jugements d’existence sont-ils possibles?’ *Quaestio: Journal of the History of Metaphysics* 3 (2003): 207-228; Michel Fichant, ‘L’Amphibologie des concepts de la réflexion: la fin de l’ontologie,’ in Valerio Rohden, Ricardo R. Terra, Guido A. de Almeida und Margit Ruffing (eds.), *Recht und Frieden in der Philosophie Kants: Akten des X. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses*, Band 1 (Berlin and New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2008), 71-93 who argues that Kant’s formalist procedure completes the destruction of ontology that began with Christian Wolff.

³⁹⁰ Cf. Oliva Blanchette, ‘Suárez and the Latent Essentialism of Heidegger’s Fundamental Ontology’. *The Review of Metaphysics* 53.1 (1999): 3-19.

argued that Kant's metaphysics establishes epistemological limits, boundaries which at the same time substantively determine what is projected beyond those boundaries, a move which undermines his supposed agnosticism.³⁹¹ Secondly, the non-realist theologian Don Cupitt is sceptical about whether Kant can be placed within the tradition of *theologia negativa*, since Kant doubts if an unknowable divine essence is philosophically tenable.³⁹² Kant instead chooses a regulative notion of God in which the contours of divine nature are delimited for use within practical reason. For Kant it is primarily the *existence* of God that remains unknown, *not* God's essence – a reversal of the classical position. Kant's rational theology thus moves within a different paradigm to negative theologians precisely because it undermines divine simplicity, since essence and existence are metaphysically prised apart.³⁹³ Thirdly, there is an irony within this radical agnosticism: since any knowledge that exceeds the bounds of pure reason is apodictically curtailed, such 'anti-anthropomorphism' can only serve an 'extreme anthropocentrism'. For Kant, to quote Roger White, '*everything* that we say about God is always to be interpreted solely in terms of the repercussions for humanity'.³⁹⁴ Moreover, Howard Caygill argues that Kant ultimately oscillates between an anthropocentric immanence, on the one hand, and an absolute sublimity on the other, an ontic divinity or an unknowable otherness.³⁹⁵ Such becomes especially cogent as regards the phenomena-noumena division: because there is no pre-established harmony or analogy between 'appearances' and 'things-in-themselves', there is an indeterminacy regarding the distinct essence of beings, including God *in se*.

Our intentions in this chapter have been to trace both the dissemination and convergence of Aristotelian and Kantian tendencies in MacKinnon's metaphysics. Aristotelian *aporetics* maintained the irresolvable tensions between particular and universal 'substance'. Such interplay was repeated in MacKinnon's reflections, and was combined with an atomist realism that advocated the primacy of *discovery* and *particularity* in our engagements with objects. Additionally, it is important to note the way in which Aristotle's critique of *methexis* and his separation of 'being' and 'substance' spurred on MacKinnon's suspicions regarding ontological analogy. Nevertheless, Aristotle's metaphysics of causality (the Prime Mover is

³⁹¹ Costantino Esposito, 'Die Schranken der Erfahrung und die Grenzen der Vernunft: Kants Moralthologie', *Aufklärung* 21 (2009): 117-145.

³⁹² Don Cupitt, 'Kant and Negative Theology,' in *Is Nothing Sacred? The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion: Selected Essays* (Fordham, Fordham University Press, 2002), 3-17. This essay was originally published in a Festschrift for MacKinnon.

³⁹³ For a general critique of this move, see Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983). However, Jüngel's own theory regarding God's historicized being, as is clear, contradicts more orthodox notions of divine simplicity and aseity.

³⁹⁴ Roger White, *Talking About God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 136.

³⁹⁵ Howard Caygill, 'Kant and the Kingdom,' in Phillip Blond (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998), 55-59.

not involved in the material constitution of being) and his ahistorical approach to the Forms (which never change, despite his emphasis on movement) did not aid MacKinnon in including historicity within metaphysics, and moreover might have hindered him from appreciating the cogency of *analogical participation*. As regards Kant's *apophatics*, his transcendentalism was read by MacKinnon as a mode of negative theology that chastened all overconfident accounts of 'intellectual intuition'. Such proclivities, as blended with Kant's critique of 'existence-as-predicate', further repealed MacKinnon's residual endorsement of the *analogia entis* since on its assumptions any analogical metaphysics remains untenable. However, we questioned the veracity of Kant's apophatics in that it harboured a clandestine dogmatism vis-à-vis our rational access to the transcendent, and had a tenuous relation to the classical tradition of *theologia negativa*. Besides this, it remains ironically anthropocentric in its religion, and does not assist true self-transcendence.

Chapter 6

Donald MacKinnon III: Between Tragedy and Metaphysics

The aim of this chapter is to show that Donald MacKinnon's metaphysico-ethical perspective informs his reception of the tragic. This is most apparent in his argument for a moral realism that serves as a truthful disclosure of the transcendence claims. In particular, MacKinnon's (Wittgensteinian) reading of Plato's *The Republic* and Kant's moral metaphysics is discussed with the purpose of displaying these connections.

6.1. *Plato the Moralist*

The exercise of 'descriptive metaphysics' served an introductory purpose of showing that theological reflection must account for those limitations that chasten any over-confidence that they could be exceeded. But MacKinnon is not satisfied with purely descriptive accounts: he remains concerned with the 'revisionary' and the 'speculative' aspects of metaphysical inquiry also. He is especially focused on what Wittgenstein calls 'the thrust against the limits of language',³⁹⁶ and how this pulsion intimates transcendent ends. Metaphysical method, in his terms, means being 'puzzled' about how the 'foundations of morality' participate in a continual 'pressure' against 'the familiar confines of intelligible descriptive discourse' (*PM*, 17). Such a move is placed within MacKinnon's argument for 'a system of projection' that is both 'descriptive and referential in intention'³⁹⁷ as regards 'the transcendent', without being 'crudely anthropomorphic' in its scope.³⁹⁸ The 'system of projection' does not rely on 'a *simpliste* model of correspondence',³⁹⁹ since it does not presuppose 'a one-one correlation between terms of propositions and constituents of fact'.⁴⁰⁰ Instead, it aims to articulate an

³⁹⁶ This is a phrase is inspired by a lecture of Wittgenstein; cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'A Lecture on Ethics'. *The Philosophical Review* 74.1 (1965): 3-12 (see p. 12). However, the exact phrase is taken from a series of notes recorded by Friedrich Waismann in discussion with Wittgenstein on the same topic. These are found in Friedrich Waismann, 'Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein'. *The Philosophical Review* 74.1 (1965): 12-16.

³⁹⁷ MacKinnon, 'The Problem of the 'System of Projection' appropriate to Christian Theological Statements [1969],' in *Explorations in theology*, 70-89 (p. 70). MacKinnon draws the language of 'projection' from Wittgenstein, who himself seems to have drawn it from geometry; cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (rev. ed. London: Routledge, 1974), §§-3.11-3.13; 4.0141.

³⁹⁸ 'The Problem of the 'System of Projection,' 75-76

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁰⁰ MacKinnon, 'The Conflict Between Realism and Idealism: Remarks on the Significance for the Philosophy of Religion of a Classical Philosophical Controversy Recently Renewed,' in *Explorations in Theology*, 151-165 (p. 154).

‘analogical unity of truth’⁴⁰¹ (or what he elsewhere calls a ‘conceptual unity’ established through ‘focal realization’⁴⁰²). In this framework, he seeks to relate, comparatively, different modes of truth articulation such as mathematics, philosophy, or literature, etc.⁴⁰³ This kind of ‘truth’ cannot be ‘described and illustrated’ in ‘a few neat formulae’.⁴⁰⁴ On the contrary, the ‘complexity and many-sidedness’⁴⁰⁵ of this means that the truth happens, as it were, on ‘the borderlands’, at the areas of ‘same level criticism’ between differing projections.⁴⁰⁶ It suggests a degree of convergence, a possibility that we inhabit ‘similarly situated territory’.⁴⁰⁷ These statements show his desire to bring together the historical and super-historical, a move which exceeds the strictures of Kantian rationalism. However, his particular interest presently is to argue that moral language has a revelatory function within its reflective structure.⁴⁰⁸ He does this through a reading of *The Republic*, wherein MacKinnon argues for an ‘ethical reflection’ that is always ‘inchoately metaphysical’ (*PM*, 30). MacKinnon’s thesis appears to be that the unfolding of moral language, especially when it touches on paradox and perplexity, reveals that our language has *reference*, that it is accountable to something. The fracture of intelligent discourse suggests that language *at this point* touches reality, opening up towards a horizon of new discovery.

MacKinnon turns to Plato’s story of the perfectly just and unjust man (*Republic* II.357a-368c). Here the myth of the Ring of Gyges is used by Glaucon and Adeimantus to probe the connection between justice and happiness. The earlier cynicism of Thrasymachus lingers in the background here: he argued that people only behave ‘justly’ when they are seen by others, and that it is rather the ‘unjust’ who are truly honest. He also contended that ‘justice’ could be enacted only through a hegemonic rule of the strong over the weak (*Republic* I. 336b-354c). In another thread of conversation, Glaucon and Adeimantus imagine a scenario of a perfectly unjust man who, by using the powers of invisibility granted by the magic ring, was able to live a life of moral turpitude while appearing perfectly upright to others. The perfectly just man, on the other hand, would be someone who lived excellently, while sabotaging his reputation so that he might receive no recognition or reward for his achievements. It is only when we have reached these extremes that we are able to judge who, ultimately, is the happier of the two, and answer the question whether justice is bound to happiness.

⁴⁰¹ ‘The Problem of the ‘System of Projection,’ 75.

⁴⁰² ‘Idealism and Realism: An Old Controversy Renewed,’ 146.

⁴⁰³ ‘The Problem of the ‘System of Projection,’ 73-75.

⁴⁰⁴ MacKinnon, ‘Borderlands of Theology,’ in *Borderlands of Theology*, 44.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 48, 51

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁰⁸ Such a move is not dissimilar from Rowan Williams’s more recent Gifford Lectures, published as *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

MacKinnon's use of this illustration is an attempt to show that moral language can be made strange and difficult. His purpose is to illustrate how we remain 'haunted' by 'the system of restraints under which we live', provoking a 'dream' of an alternate reality in which we could indulge ourselves without recompense (*PM*, 21). For MacKinnon, inspired here by the Socratic dialogue, it is when we question the 'validity' of the assumptions that underlie our actions that we enter 'the restless quest' of metaphysical inquiry (*PM*, 24), since for him it is in 'the actual moral and political choice that the metaphysical problem is raised' (*PM*, 25). Such a metaphysic is pre-eminently concerned with 'truth' and 'what is the case', and so is not materially reductionist (*PM*, 26-29). He argues that we are concerned with the problem of how language can be truly 'descriptive' and 'referential' (*PM*, 27), which relates to his emphasis on the priority of 'discovery' over 'creation' (*PM*, 28), and with a 'correspondence' between mind and world (*PM*, 29). Central to Plato's 'realism' therefore is a concern with 'what is the case', a realism which aspires towards a transcendence of the Good, because it reaches for that 'highest' standard of morality, that ideal which approximates, albeit incompletely, 'the embodiment of the real' (*PM*, 29).

Influenced here by Wittgenstein (and John Wisdom),⁴⁰⁹ MacKinnon offers a reading of Plato in which the enigmatic quality of moral language opens us to a perplexity that is the beginning of metaphysical inquiry.⁴¹⁰ The attempt to grasp and make sense of the difficulty that underlies everyday interactions alerts us to a reality of a *givenness* that exceeds ordinary perceptions. Experience reveals its strangeness, and indicates a deeper reality that defies reduction. Of course there is no infallible logic that substantiates 'transcendence', but there is an argument which says that moral perplexity is undermined in a world without transcendent ideals. On this score, one could argue that MacKinnon, in a similar manner to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*,⁴¹¹ uses Socratic dialogue as a way of *manifesting* the transcendent, beyond what logical demonstrations can achieve alone. When we encounter in the world something that resists complete description, and becomes stranger the more we attempt to describe it, we are allowed to claim *reference* for our language, for the fact that our speaking is *about* something. There is a connection to Kant here: MacKinnon was mindful of Wittgenstein's Kantian heritage (and was appreciative of it), as seen in his appropriation of Erik Stenius. He was

⁴⁰⁹ Cf. John Wisdom, *Paradox and Discovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 114-138. For a sample of such influence, see MacKinnon, 'John Wisdom's *Paradox and Discovery*,' in *Borderlands of Theology*, 222-231.

⁴¹⁰ On the 'therapeutic' aspect of this style of philosophizing, see Bowyer, *To Perceive Tragedy without a Loss of Hope*, 7-54

⁴¹¹ Cf. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 4.1212: 'What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said.' And cf. 6.522: "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical."

compared Wittgenstein's method of 'manifesting' in the *Tractatus* to Kant's ethical mode of 'metaphysical' projection (*PM*, 56).⁴¹²

MacKinnon's concern with realist 'facticity' is clear in his ensuing argument, where he returns again to 'logical atomism', and especially its assertion of a 'correspondence conception of truth' (*PM*, 31), and 'a thorough-going pluralistic realism' (*PM*, 32). 'Pluralist realism', as we have seen, asserted the reality of 'different sorts of facts' which cannot be reduced to one another. Moore argued that 'we do know, beyond shadow of question, certain states of affairs' (*PM*, 33). This leads to a reading of empiricism, and even a short chapter dedicated to its exposition in Collingwood and the Vienna Circle (*PM*, 46-52). MacKinnon does question certain ideas of factuality espoused by some empiricists, as when 'verification' becomes equated with the merely observable. MacKinnon has internalized the contributions of Popper and Einstein on the unavoidable 'speculation' and 'creation' involved in any hypothetical science (*PM*, 34-36; 44-45). Nonetheless, MacKinnon would still assert that hypotheses are concerned with 'what is the case', and therefore not with mere conjecture. While certain beliefs might be 'self-authenticated' realities (*PM*, 37), he rejects the claims of 'the thorough-going constructivists' who have precious little recourse against 'a free play of undisciplined inventiveness' that dispenses with 'the factuality of any world' (*PM*, 43-44). Despite idiomatic differences, MacKinnon believes such conclusions are comparable to Plato's ethics, in which people are urged to live in accordance with 'the way in which things are', so that 'their lives *correspond* with the order of being and becoming' (*PM*, 37). Such 'morality' could be described as an 'ultimate seriousness concerning what is and what is not the case', and is not therefore a matter of 'arbitrary choice' (*PM*, 38). However, the ethical concern with what is 'the factual' should not be reduced to a 'time-consuming, besetting concern with ultimate integrity', a 'false scrupulosity' that 'abstains from the risk of action, in the name of purity of motive' (*PM*, 39). Moral reflexivity should not be an excuse for irresponsibility. As we will see again later on, MacKinnon is critical of this kind of tragic in-decision.

What is apparent from this discussion of Plato's ethics, as refracted through Wittgenstein and atomist realism, is a concern with 'morality' as a 'system of projection' in which transcendent realities are re-presented and manifested. It is animated by a drive to establish 'some kind of analogy between our commerce with the transcendent, and our commerce with the world around us'. Such predication is 'the very heart of the problem of metaphysics'. But such a supposed 'commerce' should not give us solace for 'there is no substitute for hard work, perhaps no finality of assured attainment' (*PM*, 39). In speaking about a genuine moral concern then, 'we are speaking about learning facts' (*PM*, 40) in which the moral claims

⁴¹² Cf. MacKinnon, 'John Wisdom's Paradox and Discovery,' 231.

‘press down on the stuff of human life itself’ (*PM*, 41). Here literature (particularly tragedy) is able to represent processes of learning,⁴¹³ since ‘tragedy’ provides a blending of ‘discovery’ and ‘invention’. MacKinnon argues this is so in his discussion of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (*PM*, 40-43). The question posed here exposes us to the precariousness of decisions risked in ‘a world we have not made’ (to use the language of Rowan Williams).⁴¹⁴ Since we encounter in tragic experiences ‘the nature of our human responsibility’,⁴¹⁵ then on MacKinnon’s view we cannot reduce such learning to an ‘ethical naturalism’ (e.g. Bentham). On the contrary, to take moral dilemmas seriously, is ‘one way of advancing beyond such frontiers’ (*PM*, 44), namely, beyond the ‘frontiers’ of a purely immanent description. This linkage between ethics and metaphysics is a concern that MacKinnon will return to again and again in his writings.

Before transitioning to the next section, there are a number of critical questions that should be raised. As already hinted at, MacKinnon’s acceptance of the ‘Strawsonian’ distinction between ‘descriptive’ and ‘speculative’ metaphysics is already questionable. One needs to thoroughly deconstruct any clean separation between these methods. Here Milbank’s comments are worth repeating: ‘to conceive of purgation entirely as a *prelude* to illumination, or of ‘description’ as a task innocent of speculation, may forestall illumination altogether, or else radically determine its instance’.⁴¹⁶ In this regard, MacKinnon admits a sway to the ‘creative’ element of knowledge, but he does seem at pains to resist post-Kantian ‘constructivism’.⁴¹⁷ And while he is certainly not a positivist – nor an adherent of the fact-value distinction⁴¹⁸ – it is again worth raising whether MacKinnon’s account of ‘facticity’ is sufficiently sensitive to way that facts are dependent upon historical processes.⁴¹⁹ This could be because MacKinnon’s proclivity remains for Platonic ‘presence’ over Aristotelian teleology (as Milbank says).⁴²⁰ Admittedly, this is not exactly right since, as Catherine Pickstock has argued regarding *The Republic*,⁴²¹ Plato’s reflections on ‘justice’ already gave place to temporality and its impact on ‘practical wisdom’. Yet despite these qualifications,

⁴¹³ On the processes of growth-in-knowledge as found in tragic literature, see Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*. The Literary Agenda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 30-55.

⁴¹⁴ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 108-115.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴¹⁶ Milbank, ‘The Critique of a Theology of Right,’ 18. One does wonder whether Wittgenstein’s Kantianism creates problems for MacKinnon as regards clarifying this relation. For a critique of Wittgenstein’s Kantianism, see Conor Cunningham, ‘Language: Theology after Wittgenstein,’ in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 64-90.

⁴¹⁷ It is ultimately questionable whether ‘constructivism’ has a Kantian origin; there are earlier indications of its presence already in Cusa and Vico. Cf. Robert C. Miner, *Truth in the Making: Creative Knowledge in Theology and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁴¹⁸ See Bowyer, *To Perceive Tragedy without Loss of Hope*, 44-54.

⁴¹⁹ See again Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (3rd ed., London and New York: Verso, 1993), who is pervasively critical of modern ‘scientism’ (Popper included).

⁴²⁰ Cf. Milbank, ‘A Critique of the Theology of Right,’ 21.

⁴²¹ Catherine Pickstock, ‘Justice and Prudence: Principles of Order in the Platonic City’. *Heythrop Journal* 42 (2001): 269-282.

one can see something of Milbank's concern here: MacKinnon appears to have abstracted Glaucon and Adeimantus's thought-experiment from the context of Socrates's *response*, which was directed to how justice is situated within the *polis*, and how our dependency on civic structures is the context in which true justice should be established (Cf. *Republic* II.368dff.). Moreover, he has neglected, as Milbank suggests, the 'particular social practice' that formed the figure of Socrates,⁴²² remaining too focused on the individual philosopher and his enigmatic persona. One possible reason why MacKinnon avoids this 'pedagogy' is because he refused Plato's politics, since he reads Plato (and Hegel) as collapsing the ideal with the actual. For him, Plato's politics is short on moral irony, and how ideas of a just order are subject to change and growth (*PM*, 160).

Much like Wittgenstein's *Zettel*, MacKinnon appears to emphasise irresolution *itself* as an answer to our dilemmas.⁴²³ Not providing a 'solution' but to 'lay the texture of the problem bare'⁴²⁴ is central to MacKinnon's realism. It is this emphasis on irony that makes MacKinnon weary of Platonic metaphysics, and any account of participation and 'intellectual intuition' that is linked to this. In other words, MacKinnon's tendency is towards the primacy of *problem* over solution, in his meta-ethics, and elsewhere more generally. Whether this preference is problematic cannot be decided abstractly, since there are circumstances where it is morally necessary to emphasise one or another. What can be said is that MacKinnon's preference tends to be *deontological* in its emphasis, placing supremacy on situations where moral crises are prevalent, rather than on the ordinary virtues – 'the banality of goodness'⁴²⁵ – that characterises the everyday. It tends towards authenticity and scrupulosity rather than the development of *Sittlichkeit*, those moral institutions that remain essential for socialized justice and law-making.

6.2. The Irreducibility of the Ethical

Kant's theory of 'the primacy of practical' reason cannot be separated from his metaphysics, especially as this relates to his stringent limitations on the capacity of reason.⁴²⁶ However, as

⁴²² Milbank, 'A Critique of the Theology of Right,' 20.

⁴²³ Cf. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), §314.

⁴²⁴ MacKinnon, 'On the Notion of the Philosophy of History,' in *Borderlands of Theology*, 152-168 (p. 156). MacKinnon reference here is to St. Paul, but can be readily applied to MacKinnon himself. Also cf. MacKinnon, 'The Crux of Morality'. *The Listener* 40 (16 Dec. 1948): 926-27.

⁴²⁵ This phrase is taken from Terry Eagleton's *The Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 273-316.

⁴²⁶ MacKinnon is aware of the ambiguities of this position. He says for the instance, echoing post-Hegelian critiques, that 'It is only...when we recognise inherent limitations of...understanding' operation that we can school ourselves to the acknowledgement of that which lies outside its scope. Yet, in the end we face the question how we are to say anything of that which lies outside those limits, without using those very concepts which we have restricted to use within the limits of experience,

is recognized by Kant scholars,⁴²⁷ what seems unachievable within reason is essential to the ethical domain. Here a metaphysical structure is required to supplement the formalist and universal scope of ethical norms.⁴²⁸ For Kant, ethical duties are not subject to contingencies or ‘hypothetical’ deduction; rather, they form an unequivocal claim that transgresses any particular or localized observation, and are thus ‘categorical’.⁴²⁹ As MacKinnon reiterates, in Kant’s moral scheme we are claimed by something that approximates ‘the unconditioned’,⁴³⁰ by a ‘peremptory authority’ (*PM*, 54) that works against our parochial interests. Thus we have to discipline ourselves from ‘trying to jump out of our cognitive skins’ (*PM*, 55), since our constant temptation is to usurp our finite condition. For MacKinnon, morality is intrinsically bound up with ‘self-criticism’,⁴³¹ with that movement in which we test our assumptions. Such a process is essential for moral humanity, since as we are made conscious of the relative boundedness of our perspectives, we become aware of our entanglement and dependency on what is other to us. The diligence of an ethical *askesis* constitutes, for MacKinnon, a negative theology because it makes us aware of ‘the limits of the intelligible’ against which our moral language continues to ‘thrust’ (*PM*, 57), and awakens us to the transcendent reach of its claims.⁴³² Our capacity to relativize perspectives is entwined with our freedom, which for MacKinnon and Kant is our mode of ‘commerce with the ultimate’ (*PM*, 62). For Kant (and MacKinnon it would seem), ‘the absolute for human beings is always realised as a *Sollen*’,⁴³³ a willingness which establishes the ethos of self-questioning as the essence of metaphysics, a process of conscientisation whereby moral idiolects are ever-so gradually stretched towards ‘ultimate questions’.⁴³⁴

Metaphysics according to MacKinnon is found in a ‘constancy’ or ‘style’ of interrogation that aims to formulate a deepened practice of questioning rather than any ‘positive body of achievement’,⁴³⁵ which for him constitutes the only achievable ‘finality’ within metaphysical and moral speculation.⁴³⁶ Once more, the primacy of *problem* over *solution* remains paramount for MacKinnon. Within the order of ethical thinking, this questioning manifests

partly to establish room for the claim upon us of that which we say lies altogether outside that experience’ (*PM*, 64).

⁴²⁷ Cf. Manfred Kuehn, ‘Kant’s Transcendental Deduction of God’s Existence as a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason’, *Kant-Studien* 76.1-4 (1985): 152-169.

⁴²⁸ MacKinnon is very much aware of the risks of such formalism within the realm of ethics, as repeats he intermittently in regard to Kant; cf. *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 69 and *passim* and *PM*, 69.

⁴²⁹ Cf. Karl Ameriks, ‘Reality, Reason, and Religion in the Development of Kant’s Ethics,’ in Benjamin J. Bruxvoort Lipscomb and James Krueger (eds.), *Kant’s Moral Metaphysics: God, Freedom, and Immortality* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 23-47.

⁴³⁰ *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 72.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴³² *Ibid.* 250.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴³⁴ MacKinnon, ‘Finality in Metaphysics, Ethics and Theology,’ in *Explorations in Theology*, 104.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

itself in our introspective ‘dialogue’ and ‘conversation’ regarding moral agency,⁴³⁷ a practice which forms part of the ‘grammar’ of ‘transcendence’,⁴³⁸ since within internalized judgements there is manifest a moral authorship that exceeds any reductive ideas of pure determinism which are unable to account for ‘the quality of mystery’ and ‘tragedy’ that belongs to human freedom.⁴³⁹ Our ability to question and revise our decision-making forms the essence of our freedom, but it does not imply that we can have a fully substantive account of what such freedom is. MacKinnon believes, like Kant, that ‘it is metaphysical agnosticism which before all else safeguards the transcendent character of morality’,⁴⁴⁰ to the extent that ‘we do not know what we are saying when we say that men [sic] are free and yet we do know what we are not saying’.⁴⁴¹ Rather than being a ‘dogmatic exposition’,⁴⁴² there is a kind of game-like or even ‘performative’⁴⁴³ character to freedom, in the sense that it is only in the exercise of liberty that we ‘bring into being a moral universe’.

Once again, this is a Kantian manoeuvre: one only acts free on the assumption that one is free. Freedom cannot be proved: it can only be assumed – or transcendently deduced – as a prerequisite for action. And yet the ‘moral universe’ that is represented through action is (paradoxically) already *there*, but is not revealed apart from its performance.⁴⁴⁴ Here again, the philosophy of the ‘charmed circle’ reappears. Such attains legibility within MacKinnon’s attempt (after Cassirer⁴⁴⁵) to harmonize Kantian epistemology and autonomy through the mediation of ‘spontaneity’,⁴⁴⁶ specifically as this ascribes a creative aspect to the rational and ethical faculties.⁴⁴⁷ One could read this as a part of his attempt to alleviate the dualisms of freedom and necessity, as can be seen in his claim that the production of moral insight and freedom occurs through a experimentation in language that is at once truthful and quasi-fictional – ‘truthful’ because we are made to recognize the impact of a world not of our making, and ‘quasi-fictional’ because we can imagine and create worlds that are not reducible to ‘necessity’. For MacKinnon, our freedom emerges as a kind of ‘game’ that ‘matters’,⁴⁴⁸ and

⁴³⁷ MacKinnon, ‘Moral Freedom (1969),’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 92.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁴⁰ *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 82-83. He says elsewhere that ‘Agnosticism is, in a sense, a foundation of a belief in human freedom’ (‘Moral Freedom, 97).

⁴⁴¹ *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 104.

⁴⁴² MacKinnon, ‘Ethical Intuition (1956),’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 102.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴⁴⁵ Cf. Ernst Cassirer, ‘Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik: Bemerkungen zu Martin Heideggers Kant-Interpretation’. *Kant Studien* 36.1-2 (1931): 1-26. Heidegger read Kant in a proto-phenomenological manner in accordance with his own reflections on temporality, that is, as a Being-towards-death, cf. Jean-François Courtine, ‘Kant y el Tiempo’. *Universitas Philosophica* 24.49 (2007): 55- 77.

⁴⁴⁶ On Kant’s metaphysics of spontaneity, see the summary found in Marco Sgarbi, ‘The Spontaneity of Mind in Kant’s Transcendental Logic’. *Fenomenologia e Società* 32.2 (2009): 19-28.

⁴⁴⁷ *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 74-75.

⁴⁴⁸ MacKinnon, ‘Ethical Intuition,’ 113.

discloses for us ‘the irreducibility of the ethical’,⁴⁴⁹ in which we continue to encounter ‘the strangeness’ and ‘persistence’ of moral debate as a sample of ‘the metaphysical questionings and gropings that are raised within the compass of a human life’.⁴⁵⁰

MacKinnon chooses moral conflict and tragedy as a prime example of such ‘persistence’, since it is here – most pre-eminently for him – that metaphysical questions impose themselves within the ordinary tracks of life. For if ‘conflict is a permanent element of human life’ then it provides justification for thinking that we are ‘reckoning with the stuff of a predicament, with what is perhaps problem, or even mystery, rather than solution’.⁴⁵¹ This discovery of what-is-the-case segues into MacKinnon’s thinking around ‘natural law’ in which ‘the way of human life’ is structured according to limits and regularities.⁴⁵² Such a presence makes itself known when human beings are ‘pressed upon, even visited, by the eternal in the most ordinary occasion of life’.⁴⁵³ For MacKinnon, where ‘practical and theoretical perplexity meet’, it is there that we encounter ‘the possibility of metaphysics’, since it is at this juncture that we engage with the real depths of being.⁴⁵⁴

But as has been mentioned previously, the attempt to reach beyond limits has the risk attached that we might ascribe an absolutised significance to the merely local, resulting in ‘the denial of freedom’ by sacrificing its ‘ultimacy in the name of a supposed vision of the world as it ultimately is’.⁴⁵⁵ MacKinnon is at pains to stress that ‘an advancement of our moral understanding’ comes ‘through the banishment from the world’ of ‘the theoretical all-embracing’ (*PM*, 60). So rather than seeking for a metaphysical and visionary totality that absolutises our fragmented perspectives, MacKinnon seems to say (following Kant) that ‘it is at the level of *Sollen* that we have commerce with the ultimate’.⁴⁵⁶ This seems to be because it is only within the remit of moral duty that we cannot avoid the impress of transcendent norms upon our ordinary activities. On this point, one could say that the reason why moral freedom is considered to be the site of transcendence is because it acts, like in Kant, as a *causa noumenon*. It resists metaphysical cognition precisely because it cannot be deduced phenomenologically, even though it has effects within the natural world.⁴⁵⁷ We are unable to

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁵² MacKinnon, ‘Natural Law (1966),’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 117.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁶ *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 89.

⁴⁵⁷ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis And Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 114 (in the original edition): ‘For, one and the same acting being *as appearance* (even to his own inner sense) has a causality in the world of sense which always conforms to the mechanism of nature; but, with regard to the same event, insofar as the acting person regards himself simultaneously as *noumenon* (as pure intelligence, in his existence that is not

cognize the essence of freedom, but we are able to discern its effects. It is within this drive towards the actualization of freedom, and the mysteries surrounding its transcendent basis, that provides an alternative to a Catholic or Thomistic metaphysics, since for MacKinnon there is ‘something suspect’ in finding solace within ‘the delineation of the modes of an analogically participated being’ which purport to have glanced the wholeness of reality.⁴⁵⁸ For MacKinnon (and Kant), ‘the ultimate’ is intuited through that which ‘engages the allegiance of our will without possibility of question or cavil.’⁴⁵⁹ As he will say in a later essay on Kant: ‘*We cannot represent: we achieve the sense of what we affirm in action*’.⁴⁶⁰

The world disclosed within the *Sollen* is discussed in a reckoning with ‘causality’. Without a notion of ‘causality’ – transcendent or otherwise – moral action becomes ‘inconceivable’ (*PM*, 62), and it becomes difficult to harmonize the realms of nature and morality. As has been mentioned already, there is a complex interplay of invention and discovery in moral reflection within MacKinnon’s thinking. ‘Causality’ is manifest in the fact that we are both active and passive in regard to our environments, since we do not ‘invent our moral nature’. Rather, it is something that we have received (at least partially) from without ourselves. Nonetheless, through self-questioning our nature becomes something that ‘we disclose to ourselves’ (*PM*, 66). This interplay between ‘discovery’ and ‘creation’ is a dialectic that MacKinnon returns to again and again in the Gifford lectures, and forms a part of his labour to articulate ways of thinking about truth beyond the reserves of mere ‘self-revelation’ (*PM*, 73). MacKinnon is constantly concerned with the reality of that ‘givenness’. To be sure, this reality cannot be represented apart from evaluative language, but MacKinnon wants to show that when we question ordinary modes of awareness, we encounter a depth-dimension to our engagements that reveals the unfamiliarity of the ordinary. The deepening of the ‘linguistically or conceptually familiar’ constitutes an *ars metaphysica* (*PM*, 78), and also connects to MacKinnon’s penchant for the parabolic.

Parables are a mode of estranging the commonplace: they are invitations to transform our beliefs about the world (cf. *PM*, 80), disturbing the usual renderings of our environments, disclosing their ‘the transcendent ground’, though without ‘evacuating [the] familiar of its own proper dignity’ (*PM*, 82). As such, they act as a catalyst for enlarging our perceptions of the world by de-familiarising our normal contexts of judgement (*PM*, 83), thereby provoking us to ‘self-knowledge’ (*PM*, 91).⁴⁶¹ Deceptively simple narratives can display our activities as more mysterious than we usually think, and can even be shocking in their estrangement since,

determinable in terms of time), he can contain a determining basis—of that causality according to natural laws—which is itself free from any natural law’.

⁴⁵⁸ As we have suggested previously, this is a deeply problematic reading of the *analogia entis*.

⁴⁵⁹ *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 89.

⁴⁶⁰ ‘Aspects of Kant’s Influence on British Theology,’ 364. The italics are original.

⁴⁶¹ MacKinnon compares parables to Cajetan’s ‘analogy of proper proportionality’ (*PM*, 80) in which two separate instances of relation are shown to have a similar proportion (e.g. A/B: C/D).

to quote Roger White, ‘our attention becomes focused on the wholly bizarre nature of the analogy we are being asked to argue from’.⁴⁶² MacKinnon states explicitly: ‘[a] parable must disturb, rather than edify’.⁴⁶³ And this is particularly true when one considers the parabolic use of ‘irony’ as a mode of projecting the ultimate (*PM*, 86), since by showing that our moral actions are situated in complex and often conflicting chains of causation, we come to realise that the world is not *only* the product of human direction, but is recalcitrant, irruptive and even tragic in its fabric. Rather daringly, MacKinnon submits parables such as ‘The Good Samaritan’ to this style of interpretation, pointing to the ‘illusion’ of supposing that a purely ‘spontaneous response to human need’ is immune from ‘tragic flaw’ (*PM*, 89). Whatever one makes of MacKinnon’s readings (which will be discussed later), one should keep in mind that his readings are being given to supplement an insight that our continued engagement with ‘the dialectical character of ethical reflection’ (*PM*, 105) opens us to certain impositions, in which we become aware of transcendent values. All parables are ‘incomplete’ and it is exactly this ‘incompleteness’ that serves as an ‘indirect indication of the transcendent’.⁴⁶⁴

This mode of expanding awareness and perception, of penetrating the metaphysics of the mundane – ‘the easily neglected, often unnoticed richness and diversity of the everyday’ (*PM*, 109) – is also tied to MacKinnon’s attempt to deepen empiricism with an account of poetic ontology. As mentioned previously, MacKinnon is resistant to the idea that ‘the factual’ should be equated with the observable. He questions whether the representation of reality can be reduced to a simple mirroring or ‘photographic’ model. Instead, here using the example of painting (namely Cézanne), MacKinnon shows that truthfulness is in some sense only gained by a process where ‘time and reflection, little by little, modify our vision’ (*PM*, 106), a movement in which we become cognisant of ‘the very interior complexity of sense-perception itself’ (*PM*, 109). Here there is something which needs time and patience to unfold, something that cannot be reduced to wish-fulfilment. We have to be aware of that which exists in independently, of ‘the very externality of the natural world’ as well as its ‘sheer objectivity’.

To see the scene before [our] eyes demands a tremendous effort. We may say of the world of which we take note by a cursory glance or even an elementary description, that we do not really see it, thereby suggesting a perception which transcends in the

⁴⁶² Roger White, ‘MacKinnon on the Parables,’ in Kenneth Surin (ed.), *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), 49-70 (quote on p. 57). He goes on to say on the same page that ‘The parable does not work in the same way as a straightforward argument by analogy at all; it confronts one with an utterly disconcerting challenge to think in a totally new way, to adopt the foreign and disconcerting perspective from which this *would* be a good analogy to argue from’ (p. 57).

⁴⁶³ MacKinnon, ‘Parable and Sacrament,’ in *Explorations in Theology*, 166-181 (p. 170).

⁴⁶⁴ ‘Parable and Sacrament,’ 181.

sense of lying outwith the reach of everyday concern with that with which we are in contact...we have to acknowledge perceptual experience which *transcends* our own, an experience which lies outwith our achieved awareness (*PM*, 108).

This patient attention on ‘the particular’ also buttresses MacKinnon’s critique of Plato (and Kant too). For MacKinnon, Plato seems to have ‘[dodged] the disciplines of close attention to the concrete and the familiar’, specifically as they open us to an ‘enlarged awareness of realities’ (*PM*, 111). This procedure is opposed to Aristotle, in MacKinnon’s opinion, since he seems to have believed in a diversity of realizable ‘goods’ and resisted Plato’s ‘totalizing’ vision of ‘the Good’ (*PM*, 95-103).⁴⁶⁵ Plato’s failure to attend to the particular results in a conceptualization that promotes absolute, non-negotiable claims, and leads potentially to what MacKinnon calls ‘the cult of the tragic’ (*PM*, 105),⁴⁶⁶ in which an individual or ‘hero’ sacrifices herself in the name of some all-encompassing intuition.⁴⁶⁷ Kant also is not immune: MacKinnon repeatedly rallies against Kant’s ethical ‘formalism’. Even though he acknowledges that Kant tried to display ‘the mystery of the transcendent’ not from ‘beyond’ but from within ‘the substance of human experience’,⁴⁶⁸ he thinks that Kant’s moral thought needs to be supplemented by using ‘a multiplicity of examples’, so that ‘the austere rigour’ and ‘paradoxes’ of his thought can be tempered.⁴⁶⁹

Summarizing so far, we have seen how MacKinnon’s reception of Kantian ethics has been used to metaphysical effect, specifically as this relates to the manner in which we as ethical subjects are able to render questionable our ordinary modes of perception. This is done with the aim of showing us how such questionability is entwined with the claim of ‘the unconditioned’ upon our lives. We come to realize that our entrenched habits of being are by-no-means ‘natural’ or unassailable, since they are finite, subject to the flux of circumstance. But if such finitude is our only point of reference, then the question as to what we are ultimately *responsible to* remains occluded from our reflection. If our moral concerns cannot be reduced to the empirical, we have to continue to probe as to what reality we *are* finally

⁴⁶⁵ On Aristotle’s diversified conception of ‘the good’, see Jorge Uscatescu Barrón, ‘Das Gute im Horizont der Seinsfrage: Zur Bedeutungsmanigfaltigkeit des Guten bei Aristoteles’. *Perspective der Philosophie* 28.1 (2002):47-83.

⁴⁶⁶ Also see *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 92-93; 97-98; 122.

⁴⁶⁷ It could be remarked here that while this reading of Plato is otherwise rather debatable, such a claim does sit in tension with MacKinnon’s own statements elsewhere regarding Plato’s extolling of the life of Socrates as an exemplary mode of *mimesis*, a life which in its specificity was not ‘tangential’ to ‘the way in which things ultimately are’ (*PM*, 110). Here MacKinnon seems to be committing himself to the view that it is through exemplars that our grasp of the moral life is expanded, that it is through an attention to their unique enactments that we are ‘enlarged’ in regard to ‘our concept of what it is to be a human being’ (*PM*, 58).

⁴⁶⁸ MacKinnon, ‘Freedom Defended (1968-9),’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 136.

⁴⁶⁹ ‘Moral Freedom,’ 98.

accountable to. For Kant, this can only be the self-legislating moral will that is enacted ‘categorically’. Any other form of responsibility implies ‘heteronomy’ and a denial of the voluntary agency of human actors.⁴⁷⁰ Kant consequently refuses all modes of ‘compatibilist’ metaphysics in regard to divine-human relations.⁴⁷¹ Being a theologian also, MacKinnon would resist this conclusion, but he nonetheless appreciates Kant’s ethical rigour. Particularly important is the idea that human agency cannot be reduced to ‘naturalism’, because this would evacuate moral debate of any metaphysical substance. This is arguably one of Kant’s most significant insights within the field of moral philosophy, namely, that we need a procedure whereby moral claims cannot be reduced to the powers of sheer observation.⁴⁷² But it is precisely at this point also where some of Kant’s most controverted claims become apparent.

Since Hegel, criticisms of Kant’s ethics have centred upon its emptiness and formalism; this is because Kant appears to have separated reason from sensibility, the universal from the particular, reason from morality,⁴⁷³ thereby rendering the ethical law as separate from the determined ends of moral agents, as pre-existing both good and evil.⁴⁷⁴ Such formalism, as Gilles Deleuze suggests, corresponds to Kant’s notion of the moral law as an ‘empty form’ devoid of concrete substance (as seen in the second *Critique*), and is comparable to Kant’s notion of time as ‘pure form’ (in his first *Critique*).⁴⁷⁵ But such formalism leaves many questions unanswered. Höhle⁴⁷⁶ summarizes several of these aporias: firstly, there is little place for a hierarchy of values within Kantian moral philosophy. It gives little sway to the operation of discernment or practical judgement in relation to competing or even conflicting duties. This appears to be the case since Kant’s aim to establish an abstract and autonomous ethics represses the constraints of historicity and ‘the intersubjective world’⁴⁷⁷ in which agents are enmeshed. Secondly, as regards Kant’s idea of human freedom as a *causa noumenon*, Höhle says that if the ‘noumenal’ self is really unknowable, we cannot know that it is really free (since we cannot exclude that it might be predetermined by another *Ding-an-Sich*). Furthermore, if there is no epistemic correspondence between the phenomenal and the

⁴⁷⁰ Cf. Kant, *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:441.

⁴⁷¹ Cf. Christopher J. Insole, ‘A Thomistic Reading of Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: Searching for the Unconditioned’. *Modern Theology* 31.2 (2015): 284-311.

⁴⁷² See Vittorio Höhle, ‘The Greatness and Limits of Kant’s Practical Philosophy’. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 13:2 (1990): 133–157.

⁴⁷³ John D. Caputo, ‘Metaphysics, Finitude and Kant’s Illusion of Pure Practical Reason’. *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 56 (1982): 87-94. Caputo argues that the contradiction lies in the fact that Kant is unable to resolve the ‘transcendental illusion’ in which ethical deliberation is able to transcend the finite, while reason is supposed to be bound to it.

⁴⁷⁴ Cf. Allen W. Wood, ‘The Emptiness of the Moral Will’. *The Monist* 72.3 (1989): 454-483.

⁴⁷⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: The Athlone Press, 1984), X.

⁴⁷⁶ Höhle, ‘The Greatness and Limits of Kant’s Practical Philosophy,’ 145-156.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

noumenal self, then we cannot assert with confidence the moral integrity of *any* person, because there always remains the possibility that phenomenal ‘appearance’ does not cohere with the unknowable, noumenal subject of moral responsibility. Such remains the case, that is, unless one asserts that the noumenal creates the phenomenal or that God, in a Leibnizian fashion, forms a ‘pre-established harmony’ between these two realms. Both of these moves are ultimately rejected by Kant.⁴⁷⁸

This also has theological implications: for if it is through the pure formality of moral law that we have contact with the divine, then the question remains as to what kind of deity is thereby disclosed, since it is by a kind of practical ‘faith’, rather than knowledge, that we have contact with this realm.⁴⁷⁹ But this procedure has a difficulty, since on its assumptions it appears to include ‘God’ within the regime of the noumenal sublime. We can see this in the following way: Kant says that freedom is a *causa noumenon*, insofar as it does not belong to ‘appearance’, because to do so would apply an objective necessity to actions. Furthermore, divinity does not apply to the realm of ‘appearances’, but belongs to the noumenal (or is himself a noumenon). Such a God, as Kant says explicitly,⁴⁸⁰ can only be the creator of the noumenal self, which has no guaranteed correspondence to the sphere of phenomenality. It is difficult then to avoid the possibility that ‘appearance’ might be nothing more than that: *mere appearance*. And since God is not the creator of ‘appearances’ but is the creator of the noumenal self, and is himself a noumenon (‘a Something = x’), then it becomes hard to discern whether divinity is even distinct from the noumena themselves.⁴⁸¹

MacKinnon cannot be reduced to such tendencies. As has already been mentioned, he seems to have digested, at least partially, some of the post-Hegelian critiques of Kantian ethics that have focused on its formalist character.⁴⁸² This is particularly clear in his appreciation of Butlerian ethics,⁴⁸³ which sought to bring into harmony the concerns of ethics and human interest. Butler strengthened his awareness of the limitations of Kantian morality, insofar as it remained ‘independent’ of ‘the contingencies and idiosyncrasies of individual character and circumstance’.⁴⁸⁴ Importantly, MacKinnon rejects ‘an ethics of sheer obligation’ in accordance with the ‘arbitrary dictates of a God’ that fails to take into account our created nature, since morality is bound to the fact that we are certain kinds of beings, and that our

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 151.

⁴⁷⁹ Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxx.

⁴⁸⁰ Cf. Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, 101-102.

⁴⁸¹ Cf. Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 93.

⁴⁸² In light of Hegel, MacKinnon said that ‘human freedom could and must be taken beyond Kant’ (*A Study in Ethical Theory*, 233).

⁴⁸³ MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 179-206.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 268. Also see the comments of Milbank: ‘[MacKinnon] tends to suggest cautiously that a deontological ethics requires qualification in so far as our conduct may be radically guided by attention to particular facts, or particular persons regarded as embodying particular sets of values’ (‘A Critique of the Theology of Right,’ 18).

moral behaviour is entwined with this reality. Desire and happiness cannot be excluded from these considerations; however, it is only God who can guarantee a harmony between morality and human flourishing. Hereby, we should then be ‘encouraged to see ourselves as enticed by the way of obligation to tread the road of our proper humanity’.⁴⁸⁵ This is the case because MacKinnon seeks to maintain ‘the ethical importance of desire’⁴⁸⁶ within the theatre of moral action. Additionally, as a theologian he does not possess the same qualms as Kant does regarding a ‘heteronomy’ between human and divine willing, since God is the creator of reality in its totality, and not just the noumenal sphere.⁴⁸⁷ Divine providence and omnipotence (as disclosed through the narrative of the suffering Christ⁴⁸⁸) applies to the whole range of created being, including within its aegis human action, without implying any ‘theodicy’. MacKinnon’s Kantianism thus does not reject ‘heteronomy’.⁴⁸⁹ Furthermore, his concern with historical embeddedness means that our moral freedom cannot be separated from the realities of tragic limit and consequence, which implies (as he makes clear) that even good-intentioned actions have unpredictable results which cannot be considered as morally neutral. This means that something like the categorical imperative cannot have the same place in MacKinnon as in Kant.⁴⁹⁰

But such concessions do not mean that his Kantianism does not create problems. There still seems to be too much of an individualist anthropology at work within MacKinnon’s account of moral deliberation, whose ideal seems to be that of a lonely agent who discovers her ‘negative’ freedom through reflective abstraction.⁴⁹¹ Such anthropology remains in tension with his stated opinion elsewhere that personhood cannot be considered apart from

⁴⁸⁵ MacKinnon, ‘Moral Objections [1963],’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 16. Also see the following comments: ‘It is a mistake to represent the relation of ethics and religion as if either moral commandment were the expression of a sheerly arbitrary will, or as if it were a kind of confining fence by which the movement of the divine action was inexorably contained. The way in which men and women who believe find their faith changing the sense and direction of their moral action is often highly complex and elusive’ (MacKinnon, ‘The Euthyphro Dilemma’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 46 (1972): 211-221, on p. 218).

⁴⁸⁶ MacKinnon, ‘Revelation and Social Justice,’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 141.

⁴⁸⁷ He says explicitly, in a discussion of Genesis, that ‘God is the author of the world: of all things’. The quote is found in ‘Creation: Dialogue with Anthony Flew and D. M. MacKinnon,’ 225.

⁴⁸⁸ Cf. MacKinnon, ‘Teleology and Redemption (1995),’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 301-305.

⁴⁸⁹ Cf. *A Study in Ethical Theory* 275-276.

⁴⁹⁰ Cf. MacKinnon, ‘Drama and Memory [1984],’ in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 184.

⁴⁹¹ ‘MacKinnon really endorses an empty, abstract notion of the individual subject, from which it is impossible to derive any concrete notion of desirable human goals. This remains true, even though MacKinnon reworks the transcendental subject in terms of categories of performative linguistic action, giving to Butler’s ‘deliverances of conscience’ a slightly existential note in which certain forms of discourse carry the burden of upholding the possibility of freedom. Yet what is still seen as metaphysically significant is just this possibility, a freedom which can go counter to any perceived subjective ‘interest’. Where notions of the ‘good’ are divorced from visions of ‘happiness’, of what is ultimately desirable, then only negative precepts of ‘right’ can finally remain in place’ (Milbank, ‘A Critique of the Theology of Right,’ 24).

relationality,⁴⁹² and his affirmation of Hegelian critiques of ethical abstraction. For Hegel, to remove the instance from its socio-historical circumstance is precisely to misprision the instance itself.⁴⁹³ Furthermore, as Rowan Williams has suggested, MacKinnon's concern with tragedy emphasizes precisely the point that our actions are not self-enclosed but rather extend their repercussions in often unforeseen ways, binding us therefore to community.⁴⁹⁴ These points, at least partially, rebuff an over-individualizing take on MacKinnon's ethics. And yet what Williams says does not banish completely the suspicion that MacKinnon is still too much entwined with post-idealist notions of freedom and necessity, in which there remains a 'standoff' between 'purely individual motivation' and the 'lethal realities of the public world', a world in which the imagination of a *Sittlichkeit*, a collective ordering toward the good, remains largely absent.⁴⁹⁵

Kant and Schiller's notion of freedom looms large in this background. In the words of Milbank, MacKinnon still seems to read Hegelian theories regarding 'historical situatedness in semi-Kantian terms as a further categorical restriction on knowledge and behaviour, and not as the positive fact of the culturally constructed character of theoretical and ethical categories'.⁴⁹⁶ Without addressing how (to use Hegelian language) 'subjective' freedom can be rendered 'objective' within institutions and legal procedures that promote such freedom, we continue to remain in a diastatic vision of a purely 'negative' freedom, pitted against all forms of heteronomy, and a socio-political order that is viewed, dubiously or correctly, as hindering human liberty. Examining our present configurations, one can see how this vision incarnates itself either as a right-wing neo-liberalism that promotes atomism and authoritarianism at the expense of social justice,⁴⁹⁷ or as a leftist melancholy and resignation to the irrecoverable losses of alienation.⁴⁹⁸ All these aporias appear to echo suggestively the Kantian distinction between phenomenality and noumenality, in the sense that we only exist as free agents when freedom is banished from material 'appearance'. This lends itself to a narrative of perpetual conflict in which the physical world as 'appearance' is considered to be the sphere of un-freedom, and the hidden world of the noumenal ego is construed as the site of liberated expression. This regime of 'sublimity' underpins what Milbank calls a 'practical

⁴⁹² See the essay entitled 'Things and Persons' in *Borderlands of Theology*, 131-141.

⁴⁹³ Cf. *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 226 where MacKinnon contrasts Hegel with moral intuitionism.

⁴⁹⁴ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 108-115. We will return to Williams's insightful discussion later.

⁴⁹⁵ *The Tragic Imagination*, 109.

⁴⁹⁶ Milbank, 'A Critique of the Theology of Right,' 24.

⁴⁹⁷ Cf. Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 13-67.

⁴⁹⁸ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996); Wendy Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholy', *boundary 2* 26.3 (1999): 19-26; Walter Benjamin, 'Left-Wing Melancholy [1931],' in Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith (eds.), *Selected Writings: Volume Two, Part 2, 1931-1934* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 423-427.

‘contentlessness’ that acts as a ‘disguised theoretical source of the insistence on a ‘contentless infinite which goes with an exclusion of constitutive metaphysics’.⁴⁹⁹

One can see why some have spoken of a ‘gnostic’ temptation within Kantian philosophy, since there is a rather pessimistic conceptualization of the physical order in it. Kant’s privileging of the noumenal as the real sphere of freedom only seems to strengthen such a contention.⁵⁰⁰ Whether MacKinnon completely bought into the Kantian division that underlies this schema remains an open question (since he was familiar with Strawson’s critique of it).⁵⁰¹ But he does seem to have been persuaded by Kant’s transcendental deduction of freedom as something to be negatively circumscribed but not positively stated,⁵⁰² since it remained finally ‘without grounds’.⁵⁰³ This point *does* appear to be predicated on a Kantian division, since it is only within the phenomenal-noumenal distinction that his dualism between freedom and necessity becomes intelligible. MacKinnon takes seriously Kant’s determinism, but did lean towards a certain objectivity of freedom.⁵⁰⁴ This places MacKinnon on the libertarian side of the freedom-necessity debate,⁵⁰⁵ since when ‘individual responsibility’ is ‘eroded’ then ‘the tragic element in human life begins to disappear’.⁵⁰⁶

In spite of this qualification, MacKinnon nonetheless continued to have an appreciation for the Kantian division, as it corresponded to ‘the distinction between a man’s [sic] unique presence to himself as agent, and his subsequent achievement of a different sort of self-knowledge through a review of his [sic] actions as a series of causally continuous events’.⁵⁰⁷ By commandeering this idea, MacKinnon desires to guard ‘the mystery of the individual’⁵⁰⁸ from the sieges of metaphysical determinism and biological reductionism. But at the same time, as Milbank has provocatively suggested, this model of the ‘noumenal’ individual could also form a part of the ‘secular groundwork’ within post-Kantian ethics that aims to secure ‘the absolute disinterestedness of ethics, and the purity of ethical freedom, by stressing

⁴⁹⁹ Milbank, ‘A Critique of the Theology of Right,’ 24.

⁵⁰⁰ Rémi Brague, ‘Kant et la tentation gnostique,’ in Stefano Bacin, Alfredo Ferrarin, Claudio La Rocca, and Margit Ruffing (eds.), *Kant und die Philosophie in weltbürgerlicher Absicht: Akten des XI. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses*, Band 1 (Berlin and New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2013), 93-105.

⁵⁰¹ See MacKinnon, ‘P. F. Strawson’s *The Bounds of Sense*,’ in *Borderlands of Theology*, 249-256.

⁵⁰² ‘Agnosticism is, in a sense, the foundation of a belief in human freedom’ (‘Moral Freedom’, 97).

⁵⁰³ *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 97.

⁵⁰⁴ Cf. MacKinnon, ‘Ethical Intuition’.

⁵⁰⁵ MacKinnon says that if we present the views of ‘the libertarian’ and ‘the determinist’ as complementary, this does not exclude the possibility ‘that we incline more to the one than to the other’ (‘Moral Freedom’, 86).

⁵⁰⁶ ‘Moral Freedom’, 88. Also cf. ‘No determinist could write an effective tragedy, could achieve the sort of deep exploration of responsibility, justice, guilt, that we find for instance in *Electra* or in *Hamlet*’ (MacKinnon, ‘Atonement and Tragedy,’ in *Borderlands of Theology*, 101).

⁵⁰⁷ ‘Moral Freedom’, 96.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

agnosticism with regard to transcendence as a counterpart to an existential refusal of any materialist necessitarianism'.⁵⁰⁹

Therefore, it is my judgement that the Kantian influence on MacKinnon places limitations on his conceptualization of morality, and probably justifies Milbank's concern that he tacitly endorses 'liberalism', that political vision which asserts private 'goods' at the expense of common beatitude. This is supplemented by the following observations: if one takes seriously his rather pessimistic account of materiality and 'evil' more generally,⁵¹⁰ it becomes harder to defend MacKinnon against the charge of a quasi-Manichaeism,⁵¹¹ in which the created order is opposed to the realization of goodness, as seen especially in MacKinnon's rejection of any Augustinian theory of evil-as-privation (as we will see later). Such pessimism is not all-embracing because MacKinnon rejects such a totalizing perspective. But when one considers the fact that MacKinnon wants to assert a linkage between 'the realm of ends' and 'the realm of nature' (after Butler), it becomes harder to believe in the final coherency of this project, since without the *privatio boni*, the inherent ordering of nature towards goodness becomes unsustainable. Here the contentions of Milbank accrue further support: as we have learned from intellectual historians, the prioritization of evil has an intimate connection to the advent of liberalism, confirming the proposal that MacKinnon might not have adequate internal resources to resist this consequence.⁵¹² By saying this, I do not claim that MacKinnon was a liberal, but rather that liberalism is an outcome of his ethical vision. This is so because if goodness does not hold ontological priority, morality becomes a process of *containment* and *reaction* against evil, which now is just as ontologically authentic as goodness.⁵¹³ Again, this is not to say that he would have endorsed these tendencies, but rather that his individualist ethics, and his rejection of the *privatio boni*, make it difficult to achieve a coherent reconciliation between creation and moral teleology, between the spheres of 'nature' and of 'ends', even though this is exactly what he wants to do.

⁵⁰⁹ Milbank, 'A Critique of the Theology of Right,' 23.

⁵¹⁰ For a critical treatment of Kant's theory of 'radical evil', see Milbank, 'Evil: Darkness and Silence,' in *Being Reconciled*, 1-25. Also cf. Milbank's comments regarding MacKinnon on the question of evil and the tragic: 'The tragic gap between the political state bound to justice and the finally non-mediabile wills of individuals thereby sinks into an ontological abyss, which is nevertheless a sublime opening beyond our perplexity. Evil, in this conception, seems akin to Kant's 'radical evil' - almost a necessary background for the *sollen*, the moral will towards the absolute' (Milbank, 'A Critique of the Theology of Right,' 22).

⁵¹¹ Cf. Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 109.

⁵¹² Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), esp. 10-28. Also see the excellent analysis found in Jean-Claude Michéa, *The Realm of Lesser Evil: An Essay on Liberal Civilization*, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2009); Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 13-67.

⁵¹³ For a theological critique of this approach to ethics, see Milbank, 'Can Morality Be Christian?' in *The Word Made Strange*, 219-232.

6.3. The Transcendence of the Tragic

MacKinnon's preoccupation with tragedy is pervasive, and should not be limited to the period of the Gifford Lectures and thereafter.⁵¹⁴ However, MacKinnon's main discussion of tragedy within *The Problem of Metaphysics* begins with an analysis of the differences between Sophocles's *Trachiniae* and *Antigone*.⁵¹⁵ The particular motivation here is to establish the essentiality of tragic experience, and how this difference inflects our own context – especially since we can no longer share the worldview that Sophocles inhabited. MacKinnon argues that while the *Trachiniae*, on the one hand, seems to inhabit a world more 'remote' from ours, filled as it is with 'semi-divine heroes' and 'monstrous centaurs' (*PM*, 123), *Antigone* displays a series of mundane events that have a kinship to present experience. This connection becomes clear within his plangent stress on tragic 'conflict' and 'irony', both of which form touchstones for the larger argument regarding the relevance of tragedy for contemporary ethics and metaphysics. This is so since 'irony' is an exemplary mode of showing how our moral lives are entwined with realities that exceed fabrication (*PM*, 86). As such, tragedy is attuned to the exigencies of living, and is 'in accordance with the facts of the human situation', forming 'a disclosure of what is', making apparent what is often in contradiction to 'the comfortable musings of theologians and metaphysicians'.⁵¹⁶

Such does not imply that he is unaware of the problems related to distilling the 'essence' of 'the tragic'. For MacKinnon, there cannot be a simplistic reduction of 'tragedy' to a tightly-

⁵¹⁴ For example, the *Signposts* series of tractates (*God the Living and the True* and *The Church of God*) are literally peppered with references to 'tragedy', the 'tragic' or 'tragic conflict'. There are also scattered allusions throughout his writings in the 1940's and 50's (see Revelation and Social Justice [1941] and 'Prayer, Worship and Life [1953]' in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 147ff. and 61-62 resp., and 'Philosophy and Christology [1956] and 'On the Notion of a Philosophy of History [1954]' in *Borderlands of Theology*, 55-81; 152-168 resp.). There is also a reference to *Antigone* in 'Ethical Intuition' [1956] (in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 103-104). MacKinnon's 1957 study on ethics also makes prodigious references to 'the tragic', as seen in his comments on *Antigone* and Hegel (*A Study in Ethical Theory*, 241-242). His inaugural lecture at Cambridge (published 1961) already laid down programmatically the importance for theology to inhabit the 'borderlands' of philosophy and literature. In this context, he speaks of the 'revelations' of 'the human condition' (*The Borderlands of Theology*, 50) that can be gleaned from the writings of Shakespeare and Sophocles. Again in 1961, there is an extensive discussion of Plato and Sophocles within the setting of contemporary politics. On this, see MacKinnon, 'Some Notes on 'Philosophy of History' and the Problems of Human Society,' in *The Logic of Personal Knowledge: Essays Presented to Michael Polanyi on his Seventieth Birthday, 11 March 1961* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 171-78. Also cf. Graham Ward, 'Tragedy as Subclause: George Steiner's Dialogue with Donald MacKinnon', *Heythrop Journal* 34 (1993): 274-287. On p. 278, Ward says the following: 'Prior to *The Problem of Metaphysics* the category of tragedy does not appear in his work, but the tragic vision hovers at the edges of articles written in the forties and fifties...Tragedy emerges for MacKinnon not because of Greek literary form but because of the lives we lead and the times we have experienced'.

⁵¹⁵ The analysis to follow has been helped by the study of this theme in Giles Waller, 'Freedom, Fate and Sin in Donald MacKinnon's Use of Tragedy,' in Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (eds.), *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature, and Tragic Theory* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 101-118, and the excellent summary in Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 108-115.

⁵¹⁶ MacKinnon, 'Atonement and Tragedy,' 101.

canonized, marginal mode of presentation (e.g. George Steiner), on the one hand, or an over-generalizing ‘tragic sense of life’ on the other (e.g. Miguel de Unamuno). MacKinnon is conscious that we need to avoid essentialisations of this kind. He was familiar with Raymond Williams,⁵¹⁷ and was sensitive to the opinion that any taxonomy of tragedies is ‘inherently complex’, requiring a correlation of ‘family resemblance’.⁵¹⁸ This is because tragedies have a certain ‘open-textured quality’ that defies cheaply-acquired reductions.⁵¹⁹ He has said that it would be ‘a great grave mistake to generalize about tragedy as if there were an ‘essence’ of the tragic that we could extract and capture in a manageable formula.’⁵²⁰ Yet despite these qualifications, MacKinnon assigns a privilege to the category of ‘tragedy’ as a ‘system of projection’, which can be traced to its narration of the hidden consequences of moral action, the as-of-yet undisclosed threads of connection that exceed immediate grasp. It is precisely this ironic excessiveness within the moral life that manifests the non-triviality of transcendent questions. This non-triviality of tragic disclosure requires an openness to metaphysical ‘presence’ (cf. *PM*, 146-163), because without its admission, we would render vacuous the moral life and undermine its aporias. Without transcendence, tragedy ceases to exist, precisely because it is predicated on a moral axiology that pure immanence cannot provide.

Nevertheless, MacKinnon does not espouse a ‘tragic philosophy’, or any systematic ‘tragic sense of life’. Such would count as a capitulation, once more, to philosophical monism.⁵²¹ Against superficial readings of MacKinnon, one should emphasize his pervasive suspicion of any all-embracing ‘tragic’ or ‘pessimistic’ philosophy. For him, against a totalizing system, ‘metaphysics’ must be bound to the ‘concretely descriptive’.⁵²² Already in the 1940’s MacKinnon had spoken (under the influence of H. A. Hodges) of tragedy as providing a mediating position between ‘the old-fashioned rationalism and a more nihilistic philosophy’.⁵²³ This is so because tragedy discloses a kind of ‘metaphysical ultimacy’ that resists a ‘teleological explanation’ of the comprehensive kind.⁵²⁴ It provides both a realistic vision of the contingency of the world, while at the same time avoiding the trivialization of the transcendent. The ‘paradox’ of tragedy for MacKinnon then is that it both ‘demands and

⁵¹⁷ Cf. MacKinnon, ‘Theology and Tragedy’. *Religious Studies* 2.2 (1967): 163-169.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵²⁰ MacKinnon, ‘Ethics and Tragedy [1971],’ in *Explorations in Theology*, 186.

⁵²¹ MacKinnon made this clear regarding the problem of evil already in his lectures on evil (1962/1963). For summary of these lectures, see the appendix in Anthony Cane, *The Place of Judas Iscariot in Christology* (London: Routledge, 2005), 189-192.

⁵²² MacKinnon, ‘Scott Holland and Contemporary Needs,’ in *Borderlands of Theology*, 115.

⁵²³ This statement is to be found in the unpublished minutes of the Moot conference, at St Julian’s (17-20 December 1948). My access to this material, as elsewhere, has been granted by André Müller. For a history of this group, see Keith Clements, *The Moot Papers: Faith, Freedom and Society 1938-1944* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 6-17.

⁵²⁴ Waller, ‘Freedom, Fate and Sin in Donald MacKinnon’s Use of Tragedy,’ 107. Also cf. MacKinnon, ‘Teleology and Redemption (1995)’.

resists metaphysics', to quote Giles Waller. For MacKinnon, 'Tragedy *reveals* the necessity of metaphysics, while *regulating* the speculative metaphysics that attempts to pass 'beyond tragedy''.⁵²⁵ 'Tragedy' proposes and presupposes a realm of values, apart from which the pathos of human circumstance is rendered trivial; but this does not imply a confident system of 'meaning' into which all suffering can be plotted. Such applies equally to accounts of natural teleology that lack tragic irony, as it does to universalized declarations that all values are without substance, as in nihilism. This is also why MacKinnon aimed to transcend philosophies that endorsed either 'pessimism' or 'optimism'. He made clear that the Christian assertion of the resurrection of the crucified surpasses these options.⁵²⁶ Here MacKinnon is Johannine in his approach, reading the glory of the ascended Christ as coterminous with his crucifixion, his kenosis with his anabasis. As this implies, the Christological element has a centrality within MacKinnon's theology, and has special implications in his reception of tragic themes – a point to which we will return.

But it is important to note again that MacKinnon opposes any uncritical commitment to 'the tragic sense of life' or 'the cult of the tragic'⁵²⁷ (or any 'romantic cult of the heroic'⁵²⁸). Central to this critique is that tragic philosophy – much like Plato's politics, or Hegel's collapsing of the ideal with the actual – tends to convert the *is* of the present into an ethical *ought*. For MacKinnon, tragic philosophies are susceptible to this trend, since they imply a resignation before the seemingly unchangeable present. Treated thus, 'tragedy' would be converted to a form of ideology, a mode of mystification in which the current order is tacitly endorsed. Additionally, it could provoke self-immolation in the name of an all-embracing totality.⁵²⁹ All of this would be a distortion of the gospel since Christianity, on the contrary, does not have a 'vested interest in human failure and disaster'.⁵³⁰ He castigates theologians and preachers who engage in an 'academically precise pessimism', who found their *métier* in the 'disintegration of societies' and 'the coming of despair'.⁵³¹ This praxis of 'despair' or tragic 'pity', in his eyes, encourages a culture of moral irresponsibility that inhibits political 'action'.⁵³² MacKinnon is opposed to this move, as he makes clear: '[the] recognition of the tragic must not be allowed to inhibit action, even if it must deepen perception and, in

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 108.

⁵²⁶ MacKinnon, 'Order and Evil in the Gospel,' in *Borderlands of Theology*, 90-96.).

⁵²⁷ MacKinnon, 'Prayer, Worship and Life,' 61-62; *A Study of Ethical Theory*, 93, 97-98; 242; 'On the Notion of a Philosophy of History,' 156.

⁵²⁸ *A Study of Ethical Theory*, 60, 122. 175.

⁵²⁹ *A Study in Ethical Theory*, 90. Here he makes mention of Thomas Carlyle. Also, cf. his rather stringent remarks on the language of 'sacrifice' in MacKinnon, 'Moral Objections,' 21-22. These perspectives should, at the minimum, put in check the sentiments of David Bentley Hart's placing MacKinnon under the regime of a 'sacrificial totality'.

⁵³⁰ 'Borderlands of Theology,' in *Borderlands of Theology*, 53.

⁵³¹ MacKinnon, 'Scott Holland and Contemporary Needs,' 119.

⁵³² MacKinnon, 'Some Notes on 'Philosophy of History' and the Problems of Human Society,' 177.

consequence, purify the motives and intentions from which men [sic] act'.⁵³³ MacKinnon certainly acknowledges the metaphysical import of tragic awareness, but this should not imply that 'the tragic is a sort of *Anknüpfungspunkt* between creature and creator'. Instead, 'it is to remind ourselves that it is at the level of personal self-interrogation, to which tragic perception belongs, and not at that of abstract speculation that metaphysics often finds its home. We need to revise our concept of the metaphysical, to do justice to its situation in the stream of human life', and 'inevitably such a revision will enable us to take stock of its human role, and therefore of its tragic quality.'⁵³⁴ The only real *Anknüpfungspunkt* between God and humanity is to be found where the divine has most profoundly disclosed its nature, namely Jesus Christ.

One of MacKinnon's most trenchant Christological emphases is on 'the cost of victory'.⁵³⁵ MacKinnon's particular inspiration is taken from the story about the Duke of Wellington: in response to a woman's adulations of his military triumph, the Duke had replied to her by saying 'Madam, a victory is the most tragic thing in the world, only excepting a defeat' (*PM*, 126).⁵³⁶ This statement reverberates in several of MacKinnon's texts, but its gravitas is tied to the sense that our moral actions take place within a world 'we have not made',⁵³⁷ a world which does not obey an unflinching law which guarantees that actions – even good ones – will result in desirable consequences. Even our victories can come at an unexpected cost, for ourselves and for others. To quote Rowan Williams: 'If the world is our creation, or even if the world is masterable as a system of necessities, the idea of irreparable and uncontrollable *loss* ceases to make sense'. In this world, 'there are no tragedies'.⁵³⁸ Connected to this, as MacKinnon suggests, is the insight of tragic fiction in which protagonists are 'frequently broken not by their faults but by their virtues',⁵³⁹ as can be seen in the examples of Deianira, Antigone, Oedipus, and Creon, to name only a sample. MacKinnon's purpose is to manifest the ever-present truth that actions, even when they are bolstered by good intentions, cannot be immunized against the moral risk that lingers over every act. To deny such would result in us becoming 'frustrated' or 'dangerously self-deceived'⁵⁴⁰ in our ethical responsibility. MacKinnon's complexification of 'victory' provides an entrance to his tragic reading of the gospel. Since Christ's life cannot be abstracted from the continuum of time and space, it

⁵³³ MacKinnon, 'Some Reflections on Secular Diakonia (1966),' in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 67-76 (p. 70).

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

⁵³⁵ Cf. Joel Daniels, 'The Cost of Victory'. *Anglican Theological Review* 95.1 (2013): 155-167.

⁵³⁶ MacKinnon recounts this story in several places throughout his writings, thereby showing its importance for him. Cf. MacKinnon, 'Some Reflections on the Concept of Raison d'État' and 'Ethics and Tragedy,' in *Explorations in Theology*, 44; 192-193 resp.

⁵³⁷ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 108.

⁵³⁸ Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology,' in *On Christian Theology*, 154.

⁵³⁹ Waller, 'Freedom, Fate and Sin in Donald MacKinnon's Use of Tragedy,' 110.

⁵⁴⁰ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 113.

cannot be considered apart from its history of effects. By establishing this, MacKinnon's aim is to translate this into the sphere of Christology, countering the claim, made by some, that 'where the Christian religion is concerned' we are done with, or have moved 'beyond tragedy' (*PM*, 124).⁵⁴¹ For MacKinnon, this will not do since even at the level of scripture there are examples of 'tragic irony' that warrant comparison with tragic drama. MacKinnon mentions the story of Job, but it is the Gospel of John that becomes the central text for displaying this.

Earlier in *The Problem of Metaphysics*, MacKinnon had called the writer of this Gospel 'a supreme ironist' (*PM*, 120), particularly as regards his recounting of the miracles stories (*PM*, 114-121). Apropos Lazarus (John 11.1-44), he argued that John gives an example of 'omnipotence *in concreto*' (*PM*, 119) in which 'a question-mark is set against the way in which we are easily to understand it', that is, the divine as an unbounded miraculous power. In his reading, John is inviting us to continue the *lectio* until we approach the end. For MacKinnon, the resuscitation of Lazarus belongs to 'the world of myth' and 'fairy-tale' in comparison with '[the] bitter submission to the harsh realities of the human life' (*PM*, 120) that are manifest in the immediately subsequent section: the recounting of the Pharisees's murderous plot (John 11.45-57). This section is summarized – in a masterstroke of irony – by Caiaphas's statement 'that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed' (11.50, NRSV), here understood by the writer of the Gospel as applying not just to Israel, but to 'the dispersed children of God' as well (11.52, NRSV). Their murderous scheme however is unable to resist the very thing which the Pharisees feared, namely the destruction of the city itself (11.48) in 70 AD. MacKinnon's purpose in using this example is to show that the gospel, through its use of '*double-intendre*' and 'devastating irony', is able to display 'an unmistakable tragic quality' (*PM*, 125). In particular, it plays with ideas of recognition and misrecognition, inviting the reader to see the 'truth' that is there, but which is unrecognized by those who need it most.⁵⁴²

This reading is contrasted with the Lukan narrative which for MacKinnon (and especially the Book of Acts) evinces 'a narrative of triumphal progress' (*PM*, 127) that undermines 'the deep complexity of the Gospel' (*PM*, 128), and legitimates a non-tragic characterization of early Christianity. It lays the foundation for 'The most devastating intellectual temptation' in Christian thinking, in which 'the catastrophic course of events' becomes 'expressive of the working of a traceable providential order'. This leads to 'the emergence of an apologetic style which seeks to make the intolerable bearable, even edifying, which seeks to eliminate the element of unfathomable mystery by the attempt to move beyond tragedy' (*PM*, 129).

⁵⁴¹ MacKinnon is probably referencing Reinhold Niebuhr's *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (London: Nisbet, 1938).

⁵⁴² See Rowan Williams's similar reading of this gospel in *The Tragic Imagination*, 119-127.

MacKinnon thinks that the church is constantly tempted to make history ‘endurable’ when its task was precisely to make it ‘unendurable’.⁵⁴³ He therefore rejected all the attempts of abstract theodicies to solve ‘the problem of evil’ (even once describing such solvency as a ‘lie’⁵⁴⁴ or ‘sheer nonsense’⁵⁴⁵). In a similar fashion, MacKinnon rejects the *privatio boni* as ‘the most profound spiritual error of transcendent metaphysics’,⁵⁴⁶ since it draws upon a ‘metaphysical idealism’ that ‘refuses to recognize evil as positive, and not merely a negative, force’.⁵⁴⁷ He dilates his rejection by saying ‘that [the Platonic theory of privation] has only to be stated clearly, and worked out in terms of concrete examples, to be shown to be totally inadequate as an analysis either of moral or of physical evil’.⁵⁴⁸ MacKinnon’s pluralist impulses are again at work because, in his view, any account of evil-as-privation is premised upon (what Giles Waller calls) ‘a totalizing order of the Good’. To quote Waller more extensively: ‘Speaking of evil as privation in a way risks, for the metaphysical pluralist, an idolatry of our own theoretical construct of the Good at the expense of our premature reduction of suffering and evil to a mere instance of something else, in this case a lack of the Good.’⁵⁴⁹ To accept the *privatio boni* would be to miss the radical particularity of suffering, and thereby renders evil as merely an absence or lack, failing to account for its own irruptive quality. Ultimately, both theodicy and the *privatio boni*, in his opinion, are reducible to a form of metaphysical monism that is unable to recognize the refractions of the individual and the particular.

Such monistic philosophies undergird a triumphalist narration of the church that tends to ignore ‘the tragic element in Christianity’ (*PM*, 130). It forgets that even its defining event, the death and resurrection of Christ, cannot be absolved from tragic circumstance. MacKinnon’s favourite example is stark: in his mind, Christianity has to bear its share of responsibility for allowing the Holocaust to occur. He does not scold the church as such for direct responsibility, despite reprimanding (probably unfairly) the Catholic Church and Pope Pius XII for their response to the plight of Jews in Rome.⁵⁵⁰ But beyond these details, MacKinnon’s point is that the *longue durée* of the church’s anti-Judaism produced ‘a blunting of the sensibility’ (*PM*, 130) that contributed to the atrocities of Hitler’s Germany. These teachings find their basis in the New Testament itself, especially (though MacKinnon does

⁵⁴³ ‘Revelation and Social Justice,’ 152.

⁵⁴⁴ ‘On the Notion of the Philosophy of History,’ 155.

⁵⁴⁵ ‘Order and Evil in the Gospel,’ 92.

⁵⁴⁶ ‘Finality in Metaphysics, Ethics and Theology,’ 103

⁵⁴⁷ MacKinnon, ‘Christianity and Justice’. *Theology* 42 (1941), 348-54 (p. 349).

⁵⁴⁸ ‘Theology and Tragedy,’ 165.

⁵⁴⁹ ‘Freedom, Fate and Sin in Donald MacKinnon’s Use of Tragedy,’ 107.

⁵⁵⁰ It should be said in passing that this portrayal of Pope Pius XII is probably inaccurate, as contemporary scholarship has shown. Numerous Jewish witnesses confirm that the Pope was considered a ‘righteous gentile’ who contributed in significant ways to the anti-Nazi struggle. For a summary of the evidence, see David G. Dalin, ‘Pius XII and the Jews’. *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali* 69.4 (2002): 614-628.

not mention this here) within John's gospel.⁵⁵¹ The atoning death of Christ cannot be parsed out from its historical aftermath, to which the pogroms and genocides of Europe serve as an exemplary testament.⁵⁵² As such, Christology cannot be confessed apart from particularity, as well as its historical contributions to unjust suffering.

MacKinnon's Christology at this juncture simply constitutes a deepening, in his mind, of what orthodoxy says concerning the *homoousion*. For him, to 'acknowledge the supremacy of the Christology is to confess that finality belongs somehow to that which is particular and contingent'.⁵⁵³ This is done without trivializing, as MacKinnon thought Hegel did, 'the tragic depth of human existence', in which Gethsemane is turned into a kind of 'charade'.⁵⁵⁴ But just because there is 'no escape from contingency'⁵⁵⁵, 'no transcendence of the pervasive temporal, no leaping over its condition',⁵⁵⁶ such should not mean that Christ's particularity is refused 'ontological' relevance, especially for the church which is constantly tempted to forget its own contingent polity.⁵⁵⁷ There is a perennial tendency to convert or reduce Christ's 'deed' into an 'idea', rather than being drawn to 'the concrete detail' that forms its specific history.⁵⁵⁸ This explains why MacKinnon thinks that 'Christian theology may be much more than it realizes the victim of the victory won in the person of Plato by the philosophers over the poets, and particular the tragedians'.⁵⁵⁹ Because Platonism has contributed to the avoidance of the particular, such an aversion to 'the concrete detail' has led to a blindness around the historical limitation of Christ, and has contributed to some rather docetic renditions of Christ's humanity. Controversially, he even suggests that Christ's sinlessness cannot be divorced from contingent infractions, and even sinful outcomes. His was a 'historically achieved innocence'⁵⁶⁰ rather than a 'bloodless myth' (to quote Geoffrey Hill⁵⁶¹). As MacKinnon argues: 'Even if we count Christ sinless...we still see in him one whirled to destruction by the choice he made, broken to pieces in inevitable consequence of the way he

⁵⁵¹ I know it will not set this debate at rest, but it is worth mentioning here that the projection of 'anti-Semitism' onto a text like John's Gospel (or the New Testament for that matter) is anachronistic, and a stretch at best. It is better, probably, to view the reoccurring invective against 'the Jews' as form of intra-Judaic polemic. For arguments supporting this approach, see Luke Timothy Johnson, 'The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic'. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108.3 (1989): 419-441.

⁵⁵² 'Atonement and Tragedy,' 102-104.

⁵⁵³ 'Philosophy and Christology,' 58.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 81

⁵⁵⁶ MacKinnon, 'Prolegomena to Christology'. *The Journal of Theological Studies* 33.1 (1982): 146-160 (p. 158).

⁵⁵⁷ Cf. 'Philosophy and Christology,' 81.

⁵⁵⁸ 'Atonement and Tragedy,' 103.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵⁶⁰ MacKinnon, 'Some Notes on the Irreversibility of Time,' in *Explorations in Theology*, 90-98 (p. 97).

⁵⁶¹ Geoffrey Hill, 'Genesis' in *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*, (ed.) Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

elected to follow'. Therefore, to 'portray him as a serene heroic figure, always the confident master of the situations which confronted him, always sure and certain of touch in his handling of them, is to trivialize his ordeal, and diminish his significance, to belittle his mystery, and to render inauthentic his humanity.'⁵⁶² For Christ, to be human implied an element of subjection to the constraints of time, growth and limitation:

For this element of temporality...belongs to Jesus' comings and goings. What is was for him to be human was to be subject to the sort of fragmentation of effort, curtailment of design, interruption of purpose, distraction of resolve that belongs to temporal experience. To leave one place for another is leave work undone; to give attention to one suppliant is to ignore another; to expend energy today is to leave less for tomorrow...We have to ask ourselves how far this very conformity to the complex discipline of temporality, this acceptance of the often tragic consequences that spring from its obstinate, ineluctable truncation of human effort, belongs to the very substance of Jesus' defeat. Jesus' acceptance of this part of his burden can arguably be interpreted as a painfully realized transcription into the conditions of our existence, of the receptivity, the defined, even if frontierless, receptivity that constitutes his person.⁵⁶³

For MacKinnon, the irrepressible configurations of time and space apply to Christ, just as much as they do to us. Our natures are implicated and formed through 'growth' and 'estrangement'⁵⁶⁴, experiences that are fundamental for our advancement towards maturity. The temporality of human personhood does not imply a 'facile determinism',⁵⁶⁵ but rather provokes an awareness that we are able 'to fashion or refashion'⁵⁶⁶ ourselves in accordance with the givens of memory and circumstance. It is through this narration that we achieve adulthood and coherency, in which we are able to let go of past identities (or fixations) in our journey towards maturity.⁵⁶⁷ Dwelling within the constraints of time necessitates a kind of loss, but it also grants the possibility of learning. It implies a '*ceasing* to feel and think in

⁵⁶² MacKinnon, 'Evidence: Preliminary Reflections,' in *Explorations in Theology*, 116-128. The quote is on pp. 127-128. Rowan Williams comments ('Trinity and Ontology,' 157) on this teaching by saying that 'sinlessness can only be a judgement passed on the *entirety* of a life in which the inevitable damage done by human beings to each other has not sealed up the possibility of compassionate and creative relationship (even to those most deeply injured: what could one say here of the relation between the figure of Jesus and post-Holocaust Judaism, as perceived by modern Jewish writers? Does this give a hint of what the content of 'sinlessness' would be?).'

⁵⁶³ 'The Relation of the Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity,' 104.

⁵⁶⁴ 'Some Notes on the Irreversibility of Time,' 96.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 96-98.

certain ways',⁵⁶⁸ a growth from childhood to adulthood. This awareness of loss and historical limitedness is intrinsic to his understanding of tragic narration. But this perspective, it should be emphasized, does not gesture towards an unavoidably 'negative' outcome. It might suggest a non-retrievable loss for some, but this does not imply an ontological 'necessity'. Rowan Williams has made some excellent comments on this aspect which deserve a hearing.

To exist in time and its limits is to exist in a world where there is no *historical* end to risk and suffering, and thus to the likelihood of damage within any and every action. Yet this does not mean presupposing some supertemporal principle or existential curse. It is simply a matter of parsing what it means to recognize our finitude: narrative itself presupposes the irreversible passage of time and thus the omnipresence of loss. But that's the point: it is only in narrating it, 'plotting' it if your will, that it can be spoken of. What happens as result of our decisions is not an abstract and identical calamity but always the specific kind of loss that *this* unique set of temporal conditions will generate...the very act of narrating anything at all involves the possibility of *tragic* narration. The passage of time is a process of loss, *identified as such in the act of relating it*.⁵⁶⁹

This narration does not solve 'the problem of evil' or imply some soul-making theodicy. MacKinnon wholeheartedly rejects any such consolation, any 'recipes for living' that insure that suffering serves 'an end' by which our 'endurance will be justified' (*PM*, 134). To do so would involve a blunting of the edges of tragedy, and would imply a metaphysical monism in which catastrophe is absorbed into a finalized reconciliation, obliterating the profundity of tragic deprivation (*PM*, 169). MacKinnon's provocations have been summarized by Paul Janz as offering a 'system of projection' that manifests 'the finality of non-resolution'. Janz writes that for MacKinnon, 'Orientation to the tragic – to the sheerly discontinuous in human life – allows us to project our questioning to the transcendent like no other form of discourse because it gives us *factual, tangible* examples in *real empirical* human experience, of the finality of non-resolution that we must encounter in the transcendent'.⁵⁷⁰ It is at this point that MacKinnon might be accused of adopting the 'speculative closure' of the tragic sublime,⁵⁷¹ which – especially in its postmodern versions – asserts the *unthinkability* of pain and pre-judges its state of irresolution. However, for the moment, it is important to stress that for him

⁵⁶⁸ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 112.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁵⁷⁰ Paul D. Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 175.

⁵⁷¹ John Milbank, 'The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy,' in Laurence Paul Hemming (ed.), *Radical Orthodoxy? – a Catholic Enquiry* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 33-45 (p. 40).

it is this non-negotiable presence of the tragic that resists systematic containment, and it is Christianity which, ‘properly understood’, that might be able to ‘hold steadfastly to the significance of the tragic’, as this resists ‘that sort of synthesis which seeks to obliterate by the vision of an all-embracing order the sharper discontinuity of human existence’ (*PM*, 135). The hope of the church, instructed by the crucified and resurrected Christ, is not found in consolatory visions of universal meaning or theodicy, but through a participation in the ‘endurance’ of Jesus, as he moved through the darkness of Gethsemane towards the light of Easter.⁵⁷² This constitutes MacKinnon’s own ‘practical’ response to the problem of evil, against the over-generalizing approaches of philosophical theology.⁵⁷³

MacKinnon appropriates this non-negotiability of the tragic as an instance of the priority of practical rationality (*PM*, 53-71).⁵⁷⁴ As we have seen, Kantian morality is a touchstone for MacKinnon’s metaphysics. Following Wittgenstein’s ‘intuitive’ rather than ‘discursive’ praxis (as evidenced in the *Tractatus*),⁵⁷⁵ MacKinnon does not construct extensive logical premises on which metaphysics is possible. Much like Kant, he thinks religion becomes most pertinent through the claims of morality than through any abstract reflection. It is through moral perplexity that questions concerning the super-sensible become manifest, because without this dimension the question of transcendence is compromised and reduced to a variant of biological naturalism. And in MacKinnon’s eyes, it is moral tragedy that is the best ‘system of projection’ for manifesting such metaphysical concerns. In his words, it is ‘in tragedy we reach a form of representation that by the very ruthlessness of its interrogation enables us to project as does no available alternative, our ultimate questioning’ (*PM*, 136). This procedure, as Milbank has said, seems to place MacKinnon within a tradition of Anglican metaphysics that aims to radicalize the impositions of natural law as a mode of revelatory disclosure through ‘a confirmation of the conditions of our perplexity.’⁵⁷⁶ It positions him against Kant and Butler who, he says, displayed overconfidence in the capacity for self-mastery. As he emphasizes repeatedly, human beings exist in ‘situations that are very often not of their own making’ (*PM*, 137). Our intentions, even good ones, are subject to the uncertainties of chance and ‘indeterminacy’.⁵⁷⁷ It is this aspect of contingency which is the kernel of MacKinnon’s idea of the tragic, even though he sometimes seems to articulate ‘an unmistakable air of

⁵⁷² Also see ‘Order and Evil in the Gospel,’ 93.

⁵⁷³ Cf. Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) and Rowan Williams, ‘Redeeming Sorrows: Marilyn McCord Adams and the Defeat of Evil,’ in Mike Higton (ed.), *Wrestling with Angels*, 255-274.

⁵⁷⁴ Cf. Williams, ‘Trinity and Ontology,’ 155; Waller, ‘Freedom, Fate and Sin in Donald MacKinnon’s Use of Tragedy,’ 108. Also cf. Milbank, ‘A Critique of the Theology of Right,’ 21: ‘MacKinnon appears to convert the categorical imperative itself into something very like the view that it is only in tragic perplexity that we know we are free, and at the same time are brought up against the very margins of the humanly responsible world’.

⁵⁷⁵ Cf. MacKinnon, ‘Aspects of Kant’s Influence on British Theology,’ 361-362.

⁵⁷⁶ Milbank, ‘A Critique of the Theology of Right,’ 22. Cf. MacKinnon, ‘Natural Law,’ 117 and 127.

⁵⁷⁷ ‘Freedom, Fate and Sin in Donald MacKinnon’s Use of Tragedy,’ 111.

fatalism' in other contexts.⁵⁷⁸ Such an element of 'contingency' re-appears when he returns to his discussion of the parables of Jesus.

Milbank half-jokingly described MacKinnon's 'realist' interpretation of the parables 'the other way round' as a form of postmodern 'deconstruction' – though not in the style of Derrida but as if 'done by A. C. Bradley'.⁵⁷⁹ In his opinion, MacKinnon tends to read the parables in a 'Romantic' fashion, in which the 'parabolic' is distinguished from the 'allegorical'.⁵⁸⁰ Here the parables are taken as 'woven out of a 'real life' unmediated by emplotment and carrying all the freight of a 'given' human ambiguity which can then become the symbolic vehicle of a gesture towards transcendence'. And there is also 'half a suggestion in MacKinnon that the element in the parables which indicates the absolute is the pointing up of some finitely irresolvable hesitation'.⁵⁸¹ These statements, as indicated previously, are part of Milbank's critique of MacKinnon in which he charges him with reading the tragic *into* certain narratives, in which the parables (in this case) are re-narrated within an already-presupposed tragic system. MacKinnon's mistake, according to Milbank, is that he imposes 'the tragic' *onto* narratives, rather than allowing the stories to resolve naturally. This predisposition towards tragic narration explains, for Milbank, MacKinnon's attempt to read the parables against the grain of their texture, turning their unique construction into an illustration of moral alienation. For this reason, MacKinnon aims to shore up the presence of contingency within the parables, showing that one could read them 'the other way round', instead of reading them as they were written. But Milbank suggests, on the contrary, that the gospel implies that 'the tragic abyss' should be '*represented* rather than mutely indicated', and shown to be '*contained* in its historical occasion and final non-necessity'.⁵⁸² For Milbank, we should hold out instead for the possibilities that history creates, making allowances for a narration that projects different outcomes, and it is this posture that will militate against any tragic necessitarianism. By inscribing 'the tragic' into the hinterland of the text, even where it is not present, MacKinnon cements Milbank's suspicion that he is much more concerned with a tragic and irresolvable sublime (which serves as a gesture towards transcendence) than with the *particularity* of human stories. Once more, the priority of *problem* over *solution* assumes a centrality for MacKinnon.

However, there is a qualification to this picture of MacKinnon given by Milbank himself. He admits that it is over-simplistic to characterize MacKinnon's readings simply as a whimsical re-telling 'the other way round'. For Milbank, this is 'not quite' what MacKinnon is attempting. To encapsulate MacKinnon's exegesis so would be a failure to attend to *why* he

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁷⁹ Milbank, 'A Critique of the Theology of Right,' 21.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁸² Ibid., 31.

engages in this deconstruction. It is certainly not that MacKinnon is being wilful in his exegesis, or re-plotting the parables for the fun of it. On the contrary, there is as Milbank suggests a deeply *moral* rationale for his re-reading, one which places an emphasis on human contingency and finitude. Milbank admits that MacKinnon is quite right to insist ‘that one cannot legislate in advance the criteria for correct choices’, and that his aim to undermine the ‘deontological schematism’ (à la Kant) of ethical absolutism is certainly warranted. Seemingly then, in sequel to MacKinnon’s comments on pacifism,⁵⁸³ Milbank argues that ‘an ethics of virtue can never escape the problematic of ‘moral luck’, which reveals that all possibilities of good require a particular social context for their viability’. This is not to castigate pacifism as such – ‘the way of peace, the way of exemplary persuasion and forgiveness, is always the more final way’, he admits – but such a concession should not be used as a ‘sublime imperative’. Here the parables are shown to be literary exemplars of ‘the partial (never complete) alienation of the very possibility of virtuous action’.⁵⁸⁴ Our actions take place within conditions of fragmentation, implying that even good-intentioned motivations can be thwarted, which is why Milbank is sympathetic to MacKinnon’s exemplification of the ‘tragic sundering between deontology and consequentialism’⁵⁸⁵ in the context of post-war Britain.

How do these admissions qualify his take on MacKinnon? One could hazard an answer and suggest that it is precisely through a tragic re-imagining of the parables ‘the other way round’ that we are alerted to the finitude of all moral action. Milbank’s ‘not quite’ implies that such a re-reading of the parables is not simply arbitrary, but a way of showing that our choices are formed within a world that exceeds our making. Such exegesis, blended with an allegorical and anagogic reading, could do what Milbank describes as ‘the ceaseless re-narrating and ‘explaining’ of human history under the sign of the cross’.⁵⁸⁶ Such re-narrativisation, in which we become conscious of our historical limits, could contribute to our ethical growth as human beings, since it is by becoming aware of such limits that we are provided an opportunity for moral expansion. So the point of telling the story ‘the other way round’ is not to sombrely advocate a sublime resignation – as if we were fatalistically incapacitated by tragic facts – but to show that any actualization of ideals needs to attend to context, a context which might or might not resist the establishment of such virtue. The cognate inference to be made from this is that if ideals are to be embodied, there must be a labouring towards a social compact in

⁵⁸³ MacKinnon wrote that ‘the pacifist, whose concern for purity of intention...whose sense of the menace of war to personal integrity provides its own underlying justification of his policy, is easily assailed in that integrity itself, becoming not only indifferent to the claims of justice, but querulous and bigoted, sanctimonious and arrogant in his [sic] profession of pity and compassion’ (*A Study in Ethical Theory*, 241).

⁵⁸⁴ Milbank, ‘A Critique of the Theology of Right,’ 31.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

which such ideals can be incarnated. But since we are not there as of yet, one should attend to the authentic, pre-Kantian sense of ‘the sublime’ in which there is a constant ‘suspension’ in our ‘reaching towards transcendence’.⁵⁸⁷ Having sensitivity to this perennial ‘suspension’ is a part of the growing and every-increasing ‘estrangement’ that is essential for our moral and spiritual maturation.

One can demonstrate this from MacKinnon’s own reading of the parables. Take for instance his slant on the Prodigal Son (Luke 15.11-32), in which he impressionistically compares the father of the story to *King Lear*, hereby attempting to draw out the ‘ambiguities’ of the original parables. Like the father’s exuberant reception of the younger son, combined with his rather tepid response to the older one, Lear seems to adore ‘the flattery of Goneril and Regan in self-indulgent gratification of their hopes, and rejects the sharp but devoted honesty of Cordelia’ (*PM*, 137). MacKinnon finds the expression of love and acceptance within the parable, like in *King Lear*, to be fraught with tragic irony. This is because the father’s hyperbolic gratuity towards the prodigal are not replicated towards the more responsible older brother, whose own reception of his kin is decidedly cooler and even bitter in tone. He bemoans the fact that ‘For all these years I have been working like a slave for you’ and yet ‘you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends’ (15.29, NRSV). The father’s riposte to this is undoubtedly gracious: ‘you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours’, but ‘we had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found’ (15.31-32, NRSV). But for MacKinnon this response is punctured with irony since

One wishes to ask the old man why then he had not made it plain, not merely in general terms, but with the sort of party the hard-working, dull, elder brother suggests now that he always wanted, and which might in fact have made him a more forthcoming, less unattractively puritanical human being. For if the parable affirms the power of love to recreate a life, we may well ask whether that same love should not equally avail to transform the grave, disciplined prudence of the industrious (*PM*, 138).

What MacKinnon is saying is that the father’s enthusiastic acceptance of the prodigal son had not been communicated to the elder son, and that it is precisely this paucity that has left him embittered. The brother’s anger stems from a sense of inequality; it is not that the display of affection was wrong, but that it lacked parity.⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁸⁸ Whether or not this is an adequate unfolding of the text’s hidden ambiguities is not central to my efforts here, but one could further deepen this analysis by saying, in passing, that there are some

What is the point of such an ‘unduly sophisticated’ reading (*PM*, 138)? It is to show ‘the deep, characteristic human ambiguity with which the parable is saturated’ (*PM*, 138), and not simply, as Milbank suggests, to plot the parable into an *a priori* tragic edifice. This is duly expanded through examining a similar tension within the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37). Here MacKinnon, at several points, raises questions concerning the supposed message of the parable. For instance, could the Priest and Levite not claim that ‘by passing on the other side they were exercising a proper sense of discipline, refraining from any well-intentioned but possibly disastrous attempt to do for the injured man what they could not do’? This is not to condone their action, but rather to probe as to whether such assistance, without the required ‘competence’, is in the best interests of the suffering individual. Aid should be given – this fact is not in debate – but neighbourly charity should inform genuine assistance, and not a mere ‘opportunity for [the Samaritan’s] own gratification’ (*PM*, 139). Such would *not* stem from a proper regard of the other, but rather a subtle form of ‘egoism’ (*PM*, 140). But beyond this emphasis on personal motivation, good or bad, there are other contingent factors which are determinative.

Suppose, hypothetically, that the Samaritan upon crossing the road discovers that ‘his hands are infected and the oil he had used gone rancid’. What would the meaning of his assistance then imply? In such a situation, his help would contribute to the injured man’s suffering, rather than providing alleviation. MacKinnon’s stress is that ‘human beings are not thrust into the sorts of situation to which they must respond as agents perfectly designed to suit the emergencies that they must meet’ (*PM*, 140). Within any good intentioned response, the Samaritan included, there remains ‘the possibility of tragedy’ (*PM*, 141). This is because even if his actions were well-intentioned and well-executed, the injured man could still be placed, so to speak, at ‘the mercy of his saviour.’ Here the potential tragic ‘flaw’ could be activated, counter-intuitively, by that which deserves high ‘commendation’, provoking the ‘sombre irony’ that ‘in many situations it is the one who serves who, by that service, makes his beneficiary his bonds slave’ (*PM*, 141). His point is that we cannot predict the ripple effect that our actions will engender; they could bring about just relief, but they could also bring about other consequences in their wake. The knowledge of such possibilities, however, should not lead to debilitation, as MacKinnon clearly says, because even though ‘self-knowledge’ is an essential part of ‘human maturity’, this self-knowledge can potentially ‘inhibit action’ (*PM*, 143) for those who obsessively engage in it, or who fail to yield to its insights, as MacKinnon thinks Oedipus did (*PM*, 143-145). Such knowledge is necessary to achieve a greater self-honesty, but it might lend itself to tragic outcomes.

comparable links, for instance, between MacKinnon’s reading of the Prodigal Son and Stanley Cavell’s reading of *King Lear*. For this reading, see Cavell, ‘The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear,’ in *Disowning Knowledge*, 39-123.

What these last comments suggest is that MacKinnon's analyses of the parables are aimed at generating an awareness of finitude, to those instances that are not always congenial to moral action. They are directed at gaining 'knowledge' of ourselves, and the substance that forms our environment. He is not trying to be ingenious in his textual playfulness, but to show that our moral envisioning needs to be enlarged by this aspect, namely, that we do not perform our actions within an enclosed vacuum. Rather every action is contained within a *history*, and – in accordance with the heterogenesis of ends – cannot be considered apart from its effects. Our knowledge of the limits that impinge upon experiences forms an inextricable aspect of our humanness, so that a denial of them can only lead to further unwanted or tragic outcomes. By being made conscious of the often-refractory qualities of our physical and socio-historical constitutions, we are confronted with the question as to whether these indicate a non-negotiable item that cannot be suppressed, that is, without a truncation of that reality. By ignoring these factors, we fail to recognize and come to terms with 'what-is-the-case', and therefore deny reality. For MacKinnon, it is within tragedy, and its exemplification of 'the conflict of duties', that the problem of metaphysics becomes most tangible. Here again, we see MacKinnon's preference for *deontological* modes of ethics that centre on authenticity and perplexity.

In conclusion, he summarizes the impact and importance of tragedy by saying that when we are confronted by 'the irreducibility of the tragic', with those experiences that restrict 'ambitious metaphysical construction', we come to see that 'in pondering the extremities of human life' we have to 'acknowledge the transcendent as the only alternative to the kind of trivialisation' that would 'empty of significance the sorts of experience with which we have been concerned', namely 'the tragic'. The metaphysical inquiry opened by this resilience is, indeed, not ambitious: it bespeaks of a 'departure', a commencement of disclosure, rather than 'arrival'. The 'problem of metaphysics' is not 'resolved' by an attendance to those experiences that most deeply provoke such perplexities, but they might allow us 'dimly to perceive the sort of aliveness to connections which will refuse facile consolation' (*PM*, 170).

6.4. Critical Evaluation

After detailing MacKinnon's account, we can now take stock of its particular contours, bearing in mind the criticisms lodged against it. A glance at the evidence catalogued seems to present a mixed picture, one that partially confirms and contests the claims of MacKinnon's detractors: does MacKinnon mistakenly transcribe the gospel into a tragic form? Does he read narratives (e.g. the parables) into a predetermined structure of perpetual deprivation and loss? We have already intimated that this is not quite the case since, as MacKinnon has shown, the gospel predisposes itself to tragic structures. We have also shown that on the question of the parables, even Milbank concedes that MacKinnon is onto something.

But beyond these easier adjudications, it is clear that Milbank and Hart's concerns touch upon wider theological problems. One has in mind here their critiques of 'sacrificial totality', and MacKinnon's 'speculative' account of the tragic sublime. On the one hand, MacKinnon stressed 'the tragic' as an exhibition of irresolution that in its non-triviality demonstrates a metaphysical probity. He argued for moral tragedy as a 'system of projection' that is able to approximate in a more penetrating manner than others a certain 'adequacy to reality' (to quote Walter Stein).⁵⁸⁹ On the other hand, MacKinnon would be resistant to any overly-systematic account of 'the tragic'. While he certainly deems tragedy to be a non-negotiable element of experience, this does not imply that we can construct any totalized picture from it. This is why adducing the language of 'tragic theology', as Hart does vis-à-vis MacKinnon, should be approached cautiously. MacKinnon explicitly places himself in opposition to any 'sacrificial totality'. He opposed any metaphysical and moral totalization, as in philosophical monism (e.g. Hegel, Bradley, etc.) and Platonic 'intellectual intuition', which all seemed to place too much confidence in our ability to perceive the spiritual 'whole'. It was for this reason that he was critical of any language of 'sacrifice' and tragic heroism that advocated holocausts in the name of any absolute. Capitulating unthinkingly would evade moral circumspection, and thus support ideological conceits. Worth mentioning, by way of contrast, is that MacKinnon did not follow the trend of other theologians interested in 'the tragic', who seemed to adopt a more resigned posture in relation to supposed 'inevitable' developments (e.g. nuclear armament).⁵⁹⁰ Milbank opposes MacKinnon's realism to the 'Stoicism' of Reinhold Niebuhr on exactly these kinds of questions.⁵⁹¹ These aspects of his thinking seem to resist, at least *prima facie*, the thesis that MacKinnon espoused a 'sacrificial totality' and any ideological conservatism.

Similar responses could be given to Hart's critiques of MacKinnon's regarding the resurrection, as well as Milbank's comments on MacKinnon's truncated historicism. It could be argued that Hart, in *The Beauty of the Infinite*, tends to underplay the kenotic elements of the gospel. Paul says that the resurrected Christ remains the crucified one (1 Cor. 1.23, 2.2, Gal. 3.1, 2. Cor. 13.4; ἑσταυρωμένος: perfect passive participle), and is contemporaneous with us. His theology of soteriological participation in the redemptive suffering of Christ (e.g. Gal. 2.19-20; Rom. 6.1-14), as well as his understanding of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10; 11:17-34), presuppose this. The Gospel of John's identification of Christ's crucifixion with

⁵⁸⁹ Walter Stein, *Criticism as Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 1-31.

⁵⁹⁰ See *Borderlands of Theology*, 175-203 for his reflections on this topic.

⁵⁹¹ Milbank, 'The Poverty of Niebuhrianism,' in *The Word Made Strange*, 233-254, and esp. 247ff. Rowan Williams also has expressed reservations about Niebuhr (echoing the critiques of Milbank and Hauerwas) regarding 'the tragic' being used as 'a vehicle for absolution' apart from considerations of the 'complex motivations' of certain actions. 'The Health of the Spirit,' in Michael W. Brierley (ed.), *Public Life and the Place of the Church: Reflections to Honour the Bishop of Oxford* (Aldershot; England: Ashgate, 2006), 217-222 (p. 219).

his ascendant glorification also supplements this tradition (John. 3.13-14; 8.28; 12.27-33; 13.31-32; 17.1). MacKinnon's own Christology deliberately aims to bring together these dual realities.⁵⁹² He also states the resurrection is 'the *prius* of my whole argument', and that it is this that constitutes 'the ultimate source of that peculiar tension between optimism and pessimism' within Christianity.⁵⁹³ One could say that MacKinnon does temper the clamour of Easter, and therefore is open to criticism. But he does so because he is trying to disabuse the resurrection from any cheap optimism. 'MacKinnon so resisted the reduction of the Resurrection gospel to the usual categories of happy endings – reversals of fortune, revelations, journeys ending in lovers' meetings and so on. What we are talking about is neither a comic resolution nor a simple re-presentation of the catastrophe (resurrection as the proclamation of the crucified as Lord): it is a new fact'.⁵⁹⁴ Furthermore, MacKinnon is not immune to the joy-giving aspects of Easter – even though he could have been a bit more sanguine in this regard.⁵⁹⁵

But if Hart castigates MacKinnon for dampening Easter, one could respond that Hart is similarly reductive in his *theologia crucis*. To say that Easter 'vindicates not the cross but the Jew who died there'⁵⁹⁶ is true enough, but it remains too minimalist. Of course one should not reduce the cross to a symbol of resignation, or abstract the crucifixion from its historical matrix as a *political* and *unjust* subjugation.⁵⁹⁷ But one must still deal with the scriptural testimony in which Paul declares 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (1. Cor. 2.2). Nor can we ignore Jesus's declaration regarding the intimate connection between discipleship and the cross (Mark 8.34; Matt. 10.38; 16.24; Luke 14.27). What we should say is that the cross, as a form of repression and state-sponsored murder, has been transfigured by the resurrection into a sign of God's intention for the cosmos, that not even death can undermine the divine commitment to humanity. By our incorporation through baptism and Eucharist, we are given the promise that suffering and death are not the end, but are the birth-pains of a new life (Rom. 8.18-39), one to be lived already in the present, since we have died and risen with Christ (Rom. 6.1-14; Eph. 2.1-10; Col. 2.8-15; 3.1-4). On this model, the cross becomes a non-violent symbol of *resistance* against the operations of

⁵⁹² 'Order and Evil in the Gospel,' 90-96.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁵⁹⁴ Rowan Williams, "'Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed': A Response to Comments on *The Tragic Imagination*". *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018): 280-288 (p. 280).

⁵⁹⁵ Cf. 'Good Friday and Easter: An Interpretation,' in MacKinnon and Lampe, *The Resurrection*.

⁵⁹⁶ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 391.

⁵⁹⁷ See the critique of MacKinnon in Philip West, 'Christology as 'Ideology''. *Theology* 88 (1985): 428-436. But also see the response given in Kenneth Surin, 'Christology, Tragedy and 'Ideology'. *Theology* 89 (1986): 283-291.

demonic power, and is not a sublime resignation. To avoid this would be a failure to attend to the particularity and historicity of Christ's mission.⁵⁹⁸

A limitation might be present in Milbank's criticism too, since he privileges a positive, Nietzschean 'forgetfulness' as regards human suffering within the eschatological climax.⁵⁹⁹ One could raise the question as to whether Milbank's tendency to 'emplot' narratives within a 'tragi-comic' structure downplays stories which *do* end horrendously. One could legitimately probe as to whether this coheres with Milbank's own historicist intentions. Rowan Williams implies as much when he says regarding Milbank's account of narrative 'resolution' that

the issue is not whether 'resolution' is ever possible but whether we can craft or imagine a resolution that embraces the narrating of what cannot be mended – rather than resolution which explains and so nullifies the tangles and injuries of what has been done or suffered. And it is clear enough that, unless you believe that resolution must mean an *unmaking* of the past (a far more serious attempt to exit from the world of narrative), it has to be thought about as a moment in which the strands of past narrative are so entwined as to mark a possible new stage in the story – not an absolute ending which obliterates the cost of what has gone before.⁶⁰⁰

It could be said that Milbank already pre-empts such critiques somewhat. In some later reflections on martyrdom and death, he questions as to whether mourning can be understood as 'coming to terms with loss' without constituting a forgetfulness of that person's 'irreplaceable' subjectivity. Such a move, in his eyes, would be both 'immoral and unchristian'.⁶⁰¹ Of note also is that he has argued that Christianity baptizes the experience of 'moral luck': 'the Christian construal of the total sway of moral luck is to understand fortune, as always, however disguisedly, the personal gift of grace: to believe therefore that only utter exposure constitutes the ethical'.⁶⁰² However, as long as 'loss' is 'ineradicable', the possibility of 'the ethical' is hindered, even impossible, because here ethics is construed as a 'maximum

⁵⁹⁸ Cf. MacKinnon, 'Vexilla Regis: Some Reflections for Passiontide, 1939'. *Theology* 38 (1939), 254-59 (pp. 256-257).

⁵⁹⁹ 'A Critique of the Theology of Right,' 27; 34n.27.

⁶⁰⁰ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 114-115. To quote Rowan Williams: the human 'soul' (*psychē*) is 'always implicated in contingent matter, and even its final pilgrimage into God depends...upon the deployment and integration of bodiliness and animality' so that the particular *eidos* or *imago dei* is not cancelled by the resurrection, but rather redeems individuals in all their narrative particularity. For this quote, see Williams, 'Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion,' in: Lionel R. Wickham and Catherine P. Bammel (eds.), *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to Christopher Stead* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1993), 227-246 (pp. 244-245). On the theme of resurrection and personal identity in early and medieval Christianity, see Carolyn Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 239-297.

⁶⁰¹ Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 145.

⁶⁰² *Ibid.*, 147-148.

possible minimization of loss' and therefore is bound to the givenness of death. Only 'hope' in the resurrection... is able to guarantee the reality of the ethical'.⁶⁰³ But the question remains as to whether an ethics that concerns the 'irreplaceability' of subjects can bypass the particular narratives that have made them to be who they are. Since the resurrection is a redemption of the temporal, can one suggest that the resurrection cancels or 'unmakes' those histories that have constituted those specific bodies? Would this not be a kind of 'exit from narrative' that Milbank wants to undermine?

But what about MacKinnon's take on divine suffering? Is this not part-and-parcel with his *theologia crucis*? By affirming the passibility of God *in se*, does not MacKinnon thereby – on a more traditional account of the immanent trinity – render suffering ontologically basic? And when one combines this perspective with his Kantian positivity regarding evil, is this reading not strengthened further? I would say that these concerns are granted somewhat, but are dampened by other balances MacKinnon wanted to uphold. Under the influence of P. T. Forsyth, Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Sergei Bulgakov, MacKinnon is critical of traditional accounts of 'impassibility' as being unable to account for the revelation of God's nature in Jesus Christ.⁶⁰⁴ He does not want to restrict the story of Christ, in his words, to a 'universal pattern', but rather to allow that 'career's particularity' to constitute precisely the foundational 'order' of any such pattern.⁶⁰⁵ This means that MacKinnon reads the gospel as a narrative of God's kenosis and self-limitation, which itself reveals the eternal life of the triune God to be a *coincidentia oppositorum* of omnipotence and vulnerability.⁶⁰⁶ This particular history is where 'the unity of God' is 'realized' and the 'consistency of God in relation to his creation' is disclosed, providing us with 'the very rationale of creation itself'.⁶⁰⁷ Of course God is absolutely 'transcendent' as regards created being, but the very 'dependence' of the creation

⁶⁰³ Ibid., 148. This is why he can write (p. 149), speaking of both Shakespeare and MacKinnon, that 'the everyday ethical hope naturally leads to hope for resurrection...After Shakespeare had written *Lear*, there was no possibility of him remaining with the unsurpassability of the tragic, because this would actually be to *underestimate* the end of *Lear*. Since this play discloses a universal tragic sway (we cannot redeem our losses and misdeeds, there is no forgiveness), one cannot either mitigate this circumstance nor come to terms with it; that is to say accept it, even though it is true. It is so bad, that it should be turned away from, and yet it cannot be. It *must* be turned away from because it leaves *no possibility for the ethical*. This is where 'a piety of the tragic', like that of Donald Mackinnon, simply will not do, partly because it still, after all, *evades* the tragic, by hypostasizing it in a speculative fashion. (Mackinnon failed to see that Speculative Idealism espoused exactly the romantic and not perhaps very Greek cult of the tragic, which he himself perpetuated – revealing thereby his own idealism despite all his explicit disavowals, rooted in his Kantianism.)'

⁶⁰⁴ Cf. 'A Master in Israel: Hans Urs Von Balthasar'; 'The Relation of the Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity' (also see the appendix on Hans Küng, on pp. 105-106); 'Oliver Chase Quick as a Theologian'. *Theology* 96 (1993): 101-17 (and in particular, cf. pp 102; 106; 116-117); 'Epilogue: Kenosis and Self-Limitation,' in *Themes in Theology*, 229-236.

⁶⁰⁵ 'Aspects of Kant's Influence on British Theology,' 360.

⁶⁰⁶ Cf. MacKinnon, 'Evil and the Vulnerability of God'. *Philosophy* 62 (1987): 102.

⁶⁰⁷ 'The Relation of the Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity,' 99.

upon God is itself a reflection of the ‘eternal relatedness’ of the divine life *in se*.⁶⁰⁸ Much like Balthasar and Bulgakov, MacKinnon stresses that the divine kenosis is an expression of the unending *perichoresis* of the uncreated persons, so that temporal unveiling is not an alteration of the divine life *ad intra*.

However, MacKinnon is more reticent, than say Moltmann or even Balthasar, to speculate on the immanent trinity; he is concerned that the ‘aseity’ and ‘ultimate invulnerability’ of God are maintained, however ‘mythologized’ this language remains to be. The creator and creature cannot be reversed, since there is ‘a genuine, if asymmetrical, reciprocity’ between them.⁶⁰⁹ However, for him, the account of transcendence presupposed by impassibility too readily supposes a ‘divine immunity from involvement in the affairs of the world’, and thereby ‘securing an infinite, unaffected resourcefulness in creative design’ that comes at ‘the cost of rendering the exercise of such resource virtually self-contradictory’. For MacKinnon, it is ‘as if to secure the possibility of the radically self-initiated, one rendered impossible its execution’. Christianity does not affirm any ‘abstract possibility’ of the immanent triune life of God, since this would again convert the deed into an idea. Instead, it is in ‘Jesus of Nazareth in whom the incommensurables of God and man are found united, or in whom, and by whom the problem of the ‘flow’ of their union is raised by the daunting dizzying presence of its reality’.⁶¹⁰ What these comments show, on the one hand, is that he is suspicious of ‘impassibility’, but on the other hand, he does not seem to be persuaded by the more baroque speculations of Balthasar, Bulgakov, and Moltmann, which go too far in the direction of an overly-confident cataphasis.

And yet despite such qualifiers, it can be claimed that MacKinnon has not fully grasped the grammar of divine *apatheia*. As is shown by patristic scholarship,⁶¹¹ *impassibilitas* or ἀπάθεια are not used to render divinity ‘immune’ from any or all ‘passion’, as when we speak of affection between human subjects. Rather, it says that God *ad intra* is not determined by anything ‘outside’ the operations of divine being, precisely because God does not exist over-against other ‘beings’. God’s transcendence exceeds finite being and non-being altogether. *Impassibilitas* was related to ‘passions’ in antiquity which were paired with ‘imbalance’ and ‘reaction’, and classified as ‘negative’ or non-temperate emotions.⁶¹² After Nicholas of Cusa –

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., 102.

⁶⁰⁹ ‘Prolegomena to Christology,’ 157.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., 155.

⁶¹¹ Cf. Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer* (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁶¹² In this sense, divine *apatheia* did not at all imply a denial of piteity or compassion. One can show this through an example given Frances Young, a scholar of early Christianity. While speaking of caring for her son Arthur (who has a significant learning disorder), she says: ‘Emotions such as anger and envy remain potentially destructive, while others are easily corrupted – love itself can become damaging possessiveness and jealousy. Sometimes what passes for love is really self-centred anxiety,

who echoes the patristic tradition (e.g. Maximus the Confessor) – God is understood to be transcendent to such reactivity because God is the infinite source of all being and therefore *non aliud*. Since the infinite is *not* opposed to the finite – not defined over-against it – God as *actus purus* cannot be ‘determined’ by anything in creation, adverse or otherwise, because God would then be a merely ontic being. This becomes particularly acute when addressing evil and suffering: as we have stressed previously, if God suffers, then one appears to theorize agencies ‘outside’ the divine reality that determine and alter it. One could argue that this undermines the created-uncreated distinction, because the world in its limitation is seen to have a potency that works at the same ‘level’ as divine activity. But if this is so, then God as the infinitely creative source of everything is ‘externally’ determined by sinful agencies. The question then arises as to whether evil is not hereby rendered ‘positive’, and therefore has as much ‘reality’ as beatitude.

But it should be stressed once more, to avoid misunderstanding, that ‘divine impassibility’ does not advocate a cold and heartless deity, unperturbed by human beings. On the contrary, precisely because God is not limited by finitude, God is able to express an intimacy to created life, as it enfolds *esse* within the unfathomable perfection of the divine persons. The undying interpenetration between the Father, Son and Spirit, undetermined by sinful degradation, provides an assurance and comfort for believers. God is not ‘reactive’ but infinitely active and creative, an agency at work in every creature’s most intimate act of being. Precisely because God needs nothing, nor is dependent on anything, God’s love towards creation is unlimited, grounded as it is only in the infinite and eternal act of the trinity, and therefore completely gratuitous in its enactment.⁶¹³ This account does not neglect the place of Christology, or a theology of the cross. An orthodox treatment, along Cyrilline-Thomistic lines,⁶¹⁴ gives place for *human* suffering within divinity, because it is precisely in the unity of divine-humanity, here through the sinless offering of Christ, that suffering is endured and redeemed. Since God is transcendent and *non aliud*, God’s intimacy to created being is equally infinite in scope, and not limited by tragic circumstance. Such a profound relatedness is the ground for Christ’s

as I have realized when time and again distressed by Arthur’s distress, finding it hard to cope when he is unsettled, unwell, or in pain, cannot express what is wrong, and the more we try to sort the problem the more frantic and furious he gets, hating to be handled, not understanding that we’re trying to deal with his discomfort. Frustration mounts, creating its own distress and anger, which hardly helps his – in fact compounds it. Too easily inner demons of self-pity, a sense of failure, inadequacy and helplessness take over. So I recognize that I really need *apatheia* in order to love properly. Love requires a degree of detachment, an ability to let the other person be, to be ‘other’, to be what they are rather than what you want them to be.’ In Frances Young, *God’s Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 292-293.

⁶¹³ Rowan Williams, ‘On Being Creatures,’ in *On Christian Theology*, 63-78 has some excellent comments in this regard.

⁶¹⁴ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer*, 172ff.; Aaron Riches, ‘After Chalcedon: The Oneness Of Christ and the Dyothelite Mediation of His Theandric Unity’. *Modern Theology* 24.2 (2008): 119-224; Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

enhypostatic union in which we, through our own participation εν χριστώ, are granted access to the divine. On this model, human suffering is re-narrated, non-identically, within Jesus's cross and resurrection: we can complete and embody in ourselves what is lacking in Christ's suffering (Col. 1.24). For the church, this is enacted through our identification with Christ through baptism, the liturgy and sacraments, as well as our continuing witness, in word and deed, to the reality disclosed in these rituals. Our woundedness and trauma is united to Christ's perpetual self-offering in the Eucharist⁶¹⁵ and in the tragedy of the Mass,⁶¹⁶ in which we continue to participate in his oblation to the Father; consequently, we are united with each other in the body of Christ, in which we are all called to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6.2).

Here tragedy is not transcribed as a 'final' necessity. Instead, suffering and tragedy are framed as a narrative of *loss*, and precisely because it is privative, because it is *a loss of some particular good*, it witnesses to the ideal of goodness, the resourcefulness of providence, and the dignity of endurance.⁶¹⁷ However, the question of how this process will work itself out will differ in varying circumstances. Even horrendous evils can contribute to the advancement of goodness, while still remaining deplorable as such.⁶¹⁸ Admittedly, this is never guaranteed, but what is pertinent to stress though is that without any transcendent goodness or value, we would not be able to charter the true depths of misery or joy. As Terry Eagleton has written, 'there can be no tragedy without a sense of value, whether or not that value actually bears fruit. We would not call tragic the destruction of something we did not prize. If tragedy cuts deeper than pessimism, it is because its horror is laced with an enriched sense of worth'.⁶¹⁹ Similarly Walter Stein has said that

Tragic awareness is the awareness of absolute violation of being: a confrontation with infinite meanings. This is the defining distinction between 'mere suffering' and tragic awareness. The witness of the tragic tradition – as of any authentic direct response of tragic exposure – is basically just this: that man [sic] is the locus of absolute

⁶¹⁵ Cf. Marcus Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis and Trauma* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 154-170.

⁶¹⁶ One is reminded here again of *Gemma animae* of Honorius Augustodunensis (1080–1154), who was mentioned in Chapter Two. As we mentioned there, he sought to bring Greek tragedy into an explicit relation with the Catholic Mass.

⁶¹⁷ Cf. Augustine: 'In this universe, even that which is called evil, well-ordered and kept in its place, sets the good in higher relief, so that good things are more pleasing and praiseworthy than evil ones' in Augustine of Hippo, *The Augustine Catechism: The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Charity*, trans. Bruce Harbert (New York: New City Press, 1999), §11 (p. 40).

⁶¹⁸ One could imagine ways in which past tragedies and suffering provoke us to think about how they happened, and how they might be mitigated in the future. This is a perspective that is advanced by Gillian Rose and Rowan Williams. Extreme instances may suffice to demonstrate this: the Shoah and apartheid remain monstrosities. Nothing can ameliorate that. However, one could argue that in their historical aftermath expressions of anti-Semitism and racism became more intolerable, which is something good.

⁶¹⁹ Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2015), 115.

violations of being. Tragedy occurs where we enter the timeless significance of such violations.⁶²⁰

MacKinnon, while rejecting the *privatio boni*, nonetheless desires something similar. Can one coherently grasp moral tragedy without claiming metaphysical probity? MacKinnon's answer to this is clearly no. Since we cannot evacuate the transcendent without thinning-out the texture of perplexity, we cannot avoid the metaphysical context in which our actions are placed. To reduce freedom to an illusion, or to trivialise the presence of tragedy within human affairs, would be to undermine the importance of the moral life, giving little place for what is truly valuable within human experience. It is this concern which animates his stress on 'the irreducibility of the tragic', an experience which for MacKinnon – here adopting the language of Milbank – instigates both the 'purgation' and 'illumination' of metaphysics as such.

But this project has a weakness that deserves notice. As mentioned earlier, we suggested that MacKinnon's denial of the *privatio boni* undermines his Butlerian attempt to coherently relate 'nature' and 'ends'. This insight has pertinence here: MacKinnon hopes, apart from analogical participation, to render tragedy as a 'parabolic' gesture towards the transcendent. This presupposes, as Milbank has suggested, that MacKinnon makes use of the Anglican natural law tradition in which the preponderant 'limits' of the physical world are commandeered as a 'system of projection' for what lies beyond the material. Such a model requires an intimate connection between the creational order and those metaphysical structures that are opaquely reflected in it. However, minus an analogical metaphysics and evil-as-privation, one honestly wonders whether this project maintains coherency. Besides the question of how one coherently relates the historical and metaphysical without something like the *analogia entis*, the question remains as to what kind of transcendence is implied by this system of projection. If goodness does not hold ontological primacy, then what kind of 'presence' is the subject of our practical 'intuition' of the ultimate? If the natural order has no final orientation towards the Good, then how can we trust the transcendence thereby projected is not malevolent? How do we know that the 'ends' of humanity are coherent with the operations of natural law, or that such 'ends' are aimed at the perfection of our moral nature? Without a conjecture of the primacy of the Good, it becomes difficult to articulate the 'transcendence' of tragic loss in the manner that MacKinnon so desires, since without its ontological primacy, how do we speak of loss? Would evil not then be equally an expression of the *realia* too? And would this not be a consummate theodicy since tragic deficiency could be traced to a mythic ontologization of violence? On this reading, deprivations are simply an expression of the violence of being, and thereby explained and justified. Does this not resign

⁶²⁰ Stein, *Criticism as Dialogue*, 224.

us to the worst of philosophical theodicies that instigate a resignation to the way things are?⁶²¹ Again, this is not MacKinnon's intention – he is diametrically opposed to such consolation – but it is, arguably at least, an outcome of its trajectory.

6.5. Summary

MacKinnon is clearly a complex thinker. The previous chapters have aimed at justice, balancing an appreciation for his achievements with an awareness of his limitations. Our larger argument, however, did not focus just on MacKinnon, but on the sources that informed him. In summary, we said that MacKinnon's metaphysics argued for a 'transcendence' that impressed itself upon consciousness, especially within those encounters of extremity that demanded non-trivial acknowledgement. The inference to be drawn from this is that any reduction of the ontological compass of such extremities would indicate, for MacKinnon, a refusal to yield to them.

Of paramount concern here is the connection between metaphysical realism and moral responsibility. As shown throughout these chapters, MacKinnon is at pains to stress that our discernment of truth is tied to our ethical responsibility. In MacKinnon's perspective, morality is not the only site of metaphysical discovery, but it is by far the most emphatic. How ethics discloses 'the ultimate' remains for MacKinnon (as for Kant) of supreme importance. On this score, what is apparent is that his arguments do not adhere to a strictly logical or deductive approach. For him, we '*cannot represent*', but instead '*achieve the sense of what we affirm in action*'.⁶²² What he appears to be stating is that if our image of reality lacked this dimension, namely, that morality and axiology that gives tragedy its edge, then are we really engaging the world we inhabit? Here philosophical argumentation expresses a diversity that exceeds pure analytical method. This is expressive of his imitation of John Wisdom, who enacted a mixture of logic and poetics within his method,⁶²³ one that focused less on sequential accumulation than on persuasion and exemplification.⁶²⁴ Overall, one could say that MacKinnon's general approach implied an intermixture of argumentative styles, and so cannot be easily placed within the traditional aegis of Oxbridge analytics. MacKinnon works at the borderlands of philosophy, between the logics of Moore, the historicism of

⁶²¹ Cf. Terrence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991).

⁶²² 'Aspects of Kant's Influence on British Theology,' 364.

⁶²³ Cf. 'Metaphysical and Religious Language,' 208.

⁶²⁴ Martin Warner, following John Wisdom, has shown how traditional modes of induction and deduction are not philosophically exhaustive when it comes to argumentation. Philosophy is as much about rhetoric and aesthetic persuasion, which is probably even more fundamental than the usual techniques of analytic (e.g. *reduction ad absurdum*). See Martin Warner, 'Literature, Truth and Logic'. *Philosophy* 74.287 (1999): 29-54.

Collingwood, and the metaphysics of Aristotle and Kant, and so his arguments need to be evaluated from the perspective of this hybridity.

The focus of these chapters was MacKinnon's *The Problem of Metaphysics*, in an attempt to discern whether the critiques given by Milbank and Hart might apply to his mature thought. The prominent figures that arose were Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. My argument is that MacKinnon – here in partial agreement with Milbank – was finally unable to coherently relate the historical and the metaphysical *within his assumptions regarding analogy, the Kantian sublime, evil-as-privation and divine impassibility*. To establish this, I traced MacKinnon's reception of Aristotle and Kant. Beginning with Aristotle, I argued that his assimilation of 'substance' into atomist realism meant that he tacitly endorsed a subject-object dualism which resisted the constructive elements of intelligence, hereby disconnecting historicity from metaphysics. When combined with Aristotle's disconnection between the Prime Mover and materiality, his rejections of *methexis*, and the Platonic idea of the Good, another dimension was added to MacKinnon's suspicion of analogical participation. On this point, MacKinnon adopts the approach of Kant, leading to a gradual *de-ontologization* of analogy within his thought, which complicated the problems of relating the historical to the metaphysical. In addition to this, MacKinnon's movement away from the *analogia entis* traded upon the idea that it was based on an overconfident mode of 'intellectual intuition' that failed to embrace our historical and particular situatedness, as exemplified by the Platonic intellection of Forms.

In the following chapter, we argued that MacKinnon – here following Wittgenstein – wanted to show, through a reading of *The Republic*, how ethical language might be pressed for metaphysical benefit, in the sense that it is through the intensification of moral perplexity that one might be 'thrust against the limits of language'. In practicing this, we manifest a moral realism, an accountability to something that exceeds the constructive habits of mind. However, it was suggested that MacKinnon tends to abstract Plato's dialogues from their drama, in accordance with his general tendency to prioritize *problem* over *solution*. Such links up with Milbank's critique that he treats moral dilemmas within a hyper-perplexity that is not always helpful. Furthermore, it was also proposed, again in agreement with Milbank, that MacKinnon's Kantianism was predicated on a individualism which, when connected to his rejection of the *privatio boni*, makes it vulnerable to a 'liberal' assimilation, which denies the mutuality of goods (the idea that my goods are bound up with yours) since liberalism accords primacy to evil and 'negative' liberty' also.

Regarding his account of the tragic, however, it appears that MacKinnon's work mounts some resistance to their critiques. Acknowledging his subtlety was important, and his concern that moral tragedy resists reductive naturalisms deserves to be taken seriously, in that sheer determinism does not accord dignity to human agency, and the tragic suffering to which it is subjected. His understanding that our experience of 'loss' can act as a form of 'estrangement'

from entrenched strictures of selfhood added another dimension to this vision. This under-emphasized aspect of MacKinnon's thought shows that his sensitivity to the tragic did not occlude historical sensitivity. Growth is possible for the self and our social formations can be altered by choices. Of course these efforts are often tragically thwarted, but one should not assume that these are some kind of ontological necessity – even though MacKinnon can adopt neo-Manichaeism at moments. We did admit however that his rejection of evil-as-privation, his qualified acceptance of divine passibility, and his post-Critical phenomenism, finally makes him susceptible to the tradition of Kantian sublimity, in which (like Schiller) it is only through the irresolution of moral tragedy that we come to know our transcendent and noumenal freedom.

In our next two chapters, we will turn to Rowan Williams, with the aim seeing whether he is able to address and critically supplement the deficits of MacKinnon's approach. This will be done, largely, through an examination of his monograph *The Tragic Imagination* (2016). But before we reach that point, we will need to unpack Williams's metaphysical assumptions, in the hope that they give a larger background to our discussion. It is also structured in this way because such an examination of these themes in Williams's writings will further assist us in addressing some questions that Hart and Milbank have regarding whether an adoption of 'the tragic' within theology undermines a classical metaphysics of transcendent goodness, insofar as it denies aseity and the *privatio boni*, and thereby – tacitly or explicitly – promotes regimes of unrepresentable sublimity.

Chapter 7

Rowan Williams I

On Metaphysics and Poetics

The previous chapters have led us here, where we reach a conclusion regarding our central question: can one inscribe ‘the tragic’ within a classical account of transcendent goodness? And if so how? In Chapter 3, we expounded this terminology as implying, on the one hand, that God cannot be reduced to an available object *within* the created universe. But on the other, the radical difference of God does not exclude an eminent description of divine nature, since everything remains caused by God, and therefore reflects God’s nature, however dim and perspectival this perception might be. In the chapters thereafter, we addressed Donald MacKinnon, who was considered as the most preeminent figure within the dialogue between Christianity and ‘the tragic’. There we exposed his strengths and limitations, especially as regards his Kantianism. Such a heritage implicated him within a ‘speculative closure’ of being, since without an analogical participation and the priority of a transcendent good, MacKinnon struggled to account for *how* created being, and the materiality of language and historicity, could act as a truthful projection of divinity, one in which God is both transcendently *different* and *good*. Because MacKinnon rejected analogical participation, the *privatio boni*, and moreover internalized transcendentalism and the Kantian sublime, we argued that he remained conceptually hamstrung as regards his proposal of a ‘system of projection’ that harmonizes ‘the realm of nature’ and ‘the realm of ends’. This was the case, we argued, since once a noumenal metaphysics and ‘radical evil’ were accepted, as well as a denial that historical being participates within an infinite and transcendent goodness that is ontologically prior to all deprivation, then it remains hard to see how the natural order could have a more necessary linkage with moral goodness. On this model, our abstractions from ‘appearance’ to the invisible realm of the noumena can no longer project a transcendence that is unequivocally good as such. It remains within the indeterminacy of *the modern regime of the sublime*.

So the question lingering throughout is the following one: is there an option that is able to maintain divine transcendence and goodness, while remaining sensitive to the insights of ‘the tragic’? The assumption throughout has been ‘yes’, but we have not expounded what such an option might be. We have hinted at a response throughout this study, but it is here that we aim to bring out this answer more fully by looking at Rowan Williams. In doing so, we will need to be alert to the way in which he develops the classical tradition, especially as this touches the topics of transcendence and ontological analogy. We have already expounded upon his

thoughts on aseity and transcendence earlier on, but in light of the argument throughout it is beneficial now to expound his metaphysics of analogy, and its connection to the experience of historicity. Here we will have to unfurl the minutiae of his broader project, as this grows out of his reflections on *creativity*, *language* and *analogy*. We will also have to address a niggling lacuna, hovering throughout the discussion of MacKinnon, namely, the question of evil. If we talk about creaturely being as having an analogical existence to divine being, then what are we to say about those aspects of reality which do not reflect God's nature? As a consequence, we will need to unpack the *privatio boni*, and why MacKinnon (and others) misunderstand it. We will insist on seeing privation as being linked to created finitude – without identifying the two – and will also suggest, more substantively, that it implies a perversion of the gratuity of being. Evil is a *contingent* rupture and is not 'naturally' connected to existence-as-such. Such a conviction attenuates any *ontological pessimism* which propounds that createdness is fated towards non-beneficent outcomes; this is because all deviation from goodness implies a non-necessary inversion within creation. On this reading, evil is *de-natured*: it is not a 'thing' or 'substance', but rather a perversion of rightly-ordered relations and desire.

7.1. The Metaphysical Poetics of Rowan Williams

Our previous discussion of divine transcendence in Chapter 3 has already covered some of the ground presupposed here. There we indicated the problems with a 'contrastive' approach, as regards the transcendence-immanence relation, and also rejected a 'conflictive' account as being dogmatically unsustainable. Since God does not occupy an ontological 'space' within the created world, we must affirm both the radical difference of divinity *and* the profound intimacy that this difference enables, since God is closer than we could ever be to ourselves. God is not a being *within* the world, but rather is the one who gives everything its reason-for-being, and in which everything persists. Consequentially, God is both infinitely different and infinitely close to the life of creatures. It is precisely this logic that underlies the affirmation of the *analogia entis*, because within its affirmation we are able to see the world as providing – however dimly – a truthful disclosure of divine truth. This means that no aspect of reality can be excluded *a priori* from revelatory potential even though such vantages cannot be absolutised, since God always remains God. It is this vision that informs Rowan Williams's constructive engagements, and is one that he seeks to develop.

Overall, Williams agrees that the reduction of 'being' to univocal or merely formalist predicates has not assisted 'metaphysics'. In his estimate, the language of 'being' has become

‘muddled’ to many philosophers and theologians alike.⁶²⁵ However, he does not shy away from the development of such language, and is even critical of those who too quickly reject it (e.g. Jean-Luc Marion).⁶²⁶ From this we can see that Williams is not opposed to the language of ‘being’ in relation to God, that is, when it is doctrinally qualified. Also worth noting is that Williams combines this with a proclivity for a ‘realism’ that accounts for the non-reducibility of truth,⁶²⁷ without assuming an extra-linguistic or ahistorical ‘reference’ for it.⁶²⁸ For Williams asserts that ‘the ‘real’ cannot be abstracted from ‘the continuing processes of representation’, and that apart from this it remains a ‘chimera’. On the contrary, it is precisely through these never-ending attempts at representation that we achieve an approximation to ‘the real’. For him, ‘*this* is how we display ‘realism’’, namely ‘by ‘following’ what has been said and done in ways that are open to continuing scrutiny and revision’. That means we ‘show that we are serious about the extra-mental by certain features of our linguistic behaviour...by the exposure of our representations to response and correction or expansion, by behaving as though they were accountable to something more than their own inner logic or the convenience of the speaker’.⁶²⁹ Williams’s realism shows a critical internalization of G. E. Moore,⁶³⁰ in that he denies any ‘immanent comprehensiveness’ or ‘the reduction of

⁶²⁵ Williams, ‘God,’ in David F. Ford et al (eds.), *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Study for the Twenty-First Century*, 85. Also see this: ‘The language of absolute being, *ipsum esse subsistens*, and so on has become problematic in the wake of the dissolution of those elements in earlier metaphysical discourse that worked against a univocity in speaking of being. When ‘being’ has become a more unproblematic and territorialised concept than it is in Platonic and early medieval (including Thomist) thought, the risk is of seeing God as possessor of an unlimited quantity of it – or as a synonym for the totality of what there is. God is either a supreme individual or an all-pervasive quality or force in what exists. We forget in such a context the inseparability in Aquinas of the language of pure act and the language of God’s ‘excess’ in respect of being.’ He also is critical of Jean-Luc Marion – who rejects the language of God-as-being – since Marion is ‘at best cavalier about the *extended* social and historical processes whereby the name of God appears, concentrating instead on the luminous, timeless act of God in the eucharist; so that his focus upon love and gift as the words needed to speak of a God beyond, prior to, or other than being threatens to become abstract’. But he also worries (here echoing Milbank) ‘whether Marion is not himself caught in the early modern misapprehension that assumes a univocal sense for being, thus missing the nuance typical of the entire Platonic tradition by accepting too uncritically the Heideggerian insistence on the ideologically malign character of ontology’ (85-86).

⁶²⁶ See his critique of Kevin Hector, in Rowan Williams, ‘To Speak Truly about God: Rowan Williams on Kevin Hector’s *Theology without Metaphysics*’, *Marginalia: The Los Angeles Review of Books* (May 27, 2014), accessed 1/10/2018: <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/speak-truly-god/>.

⁶²⁷ See Williams, ‘‘Religious Realism’’: On Not Quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt,’ in *Wrestling with Angels*, 228-254.

⁶²⁸ See his endorsement of ‘a broadly Davidsonian picture of reference’ in ‘To Speak Truly about God’, and his reference to Davidson again in his critique of MacKinnon (‘Trinity and Ontology,’ in *On Christian Theology*, 154). Williams is drawing here upon the essay entitled ‘Reality without Reference,’ in Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 215-225. Williams’s Gifford Lectures can be fruitfully compared with the more recent essays by Hillary Putnam entitled ‘Corresponding with Reality’ and ‘How to be a Sophisticated “Naïve Realist”’. Both of these can be found in *Philosophy in an Age of Science: Physics, Mathematics, and Skepticism*, (eds.) Mario de Caro and David Macarthur (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2012), 72-90; 624-639 resp.

⁶²⁹ Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 77.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

relationality to the necessary internal constitution of a thing'.⁶³¹ Williams could, on this account, be described as an 'ideal realist', since for him 'materialised form is continued in another and higher...mode, as the form and word of thought'.⁶³² He could even be described as 'speculatively realist' (à la Quentin Meillassoux⁶³³) in the way that he denies – against Kant – that 'historical mediation provides a sceptical barrier to the knowledge of nature, and of essences' since for him 'nature herself...may be seen as inherently historical' in its being.⁶³⁴ For Williams, 'historical mediation' is important for metaphysics: he appears to agree with Hegel that 'history is how we do our metaphysics' – not in the sense that history serves as a 'record' that 'delivers to us a map of the constructions of the universe, or a comprehensive account of natural kinds or a compelling thesis about the nature of reference'. Instead, it is about an 'engagement with history', and how this 'lays bare for us the character of thinking *as* engagement, as converse, conflict, negotiation, judgement and self-judgement'.⁶³⁵ The reason why these processes should be described as 'metaphysical' is because any thinking of 'the particular' requires that we place it in a wider context of unfolding, that we move back and forth between the 'law' of the universal and 'the singular that eludes category'.⁶³⁶ Such a process renders as untenable any separation between 'identity' and 'difference', the particular and 'the concrete universal'.

Because of these tendencies, it is worthwhile to engage with his metaphysical poetics more deeply, and how it has inflected his theological output.

7.1.1. On Creativity

Williams has engaged with 'the metaphysical or ontological dimension of poetry'⁶³⁷ since the 1970's. Then already he proposed that creativity-as-such intimated something more than self-expression; for him, poetics is not reducible to manifestations of personality. He had a sense that creative practice exhibited an excess, namely, that which could not be reduced to the representing will of the artist: 'Poetry is *not* most fundamentally concerned with the expression of personality'.⁶³⁸ Human creativity is irreducible to the particular genius or ego of the artist; rather, it forms a response to what is already *there*, a perception that somehow

⁶³¹ Catherine Pickstock, 'Matter and Mattering: The Metaphysics of Rowan Williams's', *Modern Theology* 31.4 (2015): 599-617 (p. 611).

⁶³² *Ibid.*, 601.

⁶³³ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London and New York: Continuum, 2008).

⁶³⁴ Pickstock, 'Matter and Mattering,' 600.

⁶³⁵ 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose,' in *Wrestling with Angels*, 53-76 (p. 67).

⁶³⁶ Rowan Williams, "'The Sadness of the King": Gillian Rose, Hegel, and the Pathos of Reason', *Telos* 173 (Winter 2015): 21-36 (pp. 21-22).

⁶³⁷ Rowan Williams, 'Poetic and Religious Imagination', *Theology* 80 (1977): 178-187 (p. 179).

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

reality itself is expressive, that the ‘symmetry’⁶³⁹ which is achieved in poetics represents ‘a hidden holding-together’⁶⁴⁰ or ‘occult affinity’⁶⁴¹ between objects, and is not the product of an extraneous imposition, but an unfolding of their true nature.⁶⁴² Such is revealed in a ramifying process into which an artist is enfolded through an attention to her subject matter, the product of which is not a mere sample of personal effulgence. ‘Poetry’ conveys objects into relation or proportion (through rhyme, rhythm, assonance, enjambment, synesthesia, metaphor, and structure, etc.),⁶⁴³ all of which is predicated on an ‘*analogical* vision that allows us to see one thing through another [italics mine]’, ‘to see one thing through the ‘lens’ of an unexpected other’. This vision is not an inexplicable irruption but instead suggests that ‘we are always seeing ‘through the other’, that we never see anything in its own isolated terms, and that we cannot rule in advance which others are ‘acceptable’ and which [are] unacceptable in the business of extending and enlarging our perception’.⁶⁴⁴

In order for such analogies to occur there needs to be an element of non-arbitrariness in the composition, a sense that there is an objective affinity between the layers of the composition. Within the poem, the disclosure of the total ‘idea’ or ‘image’ is only achieved through the interrelation of its active elements at the level of their arrangement. The whole is revealed through its parts and remains enfolded within them. Simultaneously, such densities of expression could not be grasped without a collective allusion to the whole,⁶⁴⁵ without a more comprehensive spiritual invocation through material ordering.⁶⁴⁶ In poetics there is a genuine co-operation between the forces of active collation and receptive disclosure.⁶⁴⁷

⁶³⁹ Michael Maltby, ‘Wordless Words: Poetry and the Symmetry of Being,’ in Hamish Canham and Carole Satyamurti (eds.), *Acquainted with the Night: Psychoanalysis and the Poetic Imagination* (London and New York: Karnac, 2003), 49-70. Williams has drawn upon this work in his Clark Lectures, which will be discussed shortly.

⁶⁴⁰ Pickstock, ‘Matter and Mattering,’ 611.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 608.

⁶⁴² John Milbank speaks of poetry as being ‘the apostrophic invocation of the unknown which lurks always behind the site itself,’ in *The Mercurial Wood: Sites, Tales, Qualities* (Salzburg-Oxford-Portland: University of Salzburg, 1997), xiii.

⁶⁴³ Cf. Roman Jakobson, ‘Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry,’ in Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (eds.), *Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 36-46.

⁶⁴⁴ Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 133.

⁶⁴⁵ See the reflections of Douglas R. Hofstadter, ‘Prelude...Ant Fugue,’ in Daniel Dennett and Douglas R. Hofstadter (eds.), *The Mind’s I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 149-201. Hofstadter’s work is also influential on Williams as well, especially in the later parts of his Clark Lectures.

⁶⁴⁶ Milbank, *The Legend of Death: Two Poetic Sequences* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008), 5: ‘poetry constantly objectifies the spiritual in order that it can exist on earth at all, while it equally spiritualizes the material in order that its meaning may be realized.’

⁶⁴⁷ Cf. J. H. Prynne, ‘Mental Ears and Poetic Work’. *Chicago Review* 55.1 (2010): 126-157 (p. 138): ‘if the underlying textual features exist it is because poets are tuned into their language structures to an unusual degree of linguistic susceptibility. Such features are neither invented nor discovered, they are disclosed.’

And it is for this reason that he denies a ‘poetics whose focus is the will of the artist...a view of poetic creation which turns away from the sense of ‘coming upon’ something already given’.⁶⁴⁸ This remains in tune with his Thomistic prioritization of the intellect over the will as regards the disclosure of ‘the basic things about ourselves-in-the-world.’⁶⁴⁹ Connected to this also is his critique of the idea that there is ‘a clear difference between active mind and passive stuff, between the mind and its intellectual property or acquisitions, between language and ‘objects’, those mysteriously self-contained or self-defined things lying around waiting to be noticed and collected’. Instead, the ‘metaphysical tradition’ suggests that we ‘cannot think a reality in which substances exist as atomized systems’. Of course there is a need to maintain the ‘authentic difference’ that marks ‘the being of things’; and yet, such difference should not be objectivized to the level of ‘discrete lumps of stuff’ since there is an ‘everlasting ‘slippage’ of definition’, a ‘pattern of self-deplacement’ that occurs between things. In such a schematic, ‘difference is *neither* (at any moment) final, a matter of mutual exclusion, *nor* simply reducible, a matter of misperception to be resolved by either a return to the same or a cancellation of one term before the Other’.⁶⁵⁰

This needs to be clarified further: Williams argues that “being’ is apprehended primarily in the endless variety of particular forms, and it is only by attending to this *variety* of particular forms that being may be grasped as gratuitously creative – and thus as concrete fullness’. For Williams – echoing Maximus the Confessor – ‘the *logoi* of all things’ pre-exist ‘in God as *particular* creative intentions, dependent upon the eternal *Logos* who is the divine ground of the possibility of all otherness, all differentiation’. This metaphysical assumption underlies ‘the experience of being in the world’ since ‘the fundamental cognitive moment is the apprehension of *participation*, the participation of beings in being’. Such implies that an ‘affirmation of being is not the grasp of a formal limitlessness [e.g. the Kantian sublime or Rahner’s *Vorgriff*], since there is no possibility of expressing or thinking being without beings [because] Being depends upon the existence of particulars’.⁶⁵¹ But such *difference* should not distract us from ‘the apprehension of being as a system of interdependent contingencies, the response to which can never be *abstraction*,’ and can only be enacted in ‘the yielding of a privatised, self-enclosed perception to an ‘ekstatic’ participation [or ‘kenosis’⁶⁵²] – a self-forgetful involvement, both active and receptive, in the world as a whole’.⁶⁵³

⁶⁴⁸ Rowan Williams, ‘The Standing of Poetry: Geoffrey Hill’s Quartet,’ in John Lyon and Peter McDonald (eds.), *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Later Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 55-69 (p. 62).

⁶⁴⁹ Williams, ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics,’ 73.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

⁶⁵¹ Williams, ‘Balthasar, Rahner and the Apprehension of Being,’ in *Wrestling with Angels*, 86-105 (p. 92).

⁶⁵² ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics,’ 72.

⁶⁵³ ‘Balthasar, Rahner and the Apprehension of Being,’ 95.

For Williams, poetry aims to manifest ‘a vision of the wholeness of the contradictory world’⁶⁵⁴, an ‘incontrovertible solidity’ that intimates ‘God’s own vision of the created order’. Such serves as witness to a ‘grace constantly running ahead of our seeing or knowing, always therefore there *already* to be seen or known’.⁶⁵⁵ But it also means that there is a participatory element in our ‘re-creation’ of things that necessitates ‘an entirely committed immersion in the world, a watching and listening in silences’.⁶⁵⁶ However, as one begins the perception is strengthened that there is something that exceeds the artist in her production, that there is ‘a tension between the life of language and its use...between what is meant by us as users and what is ‘meant’ by the elusive resource of language itself, escaping our conscious strategies’.⁶⁵⁷ ‘The poet *adds* to the world,’ that is, ‘to the totality of language,’ but such creative impulsion should not be read as being traceable only to the genius of the artist. Rather there is an awareness that ‘[t]he reality before him [or her] is obscurely incomplete: it proposes to the poet the task of making it significant,’ without implying that the artist projects ‘an alien structure of explanation’ upon the world as such.⁶⁵⁸

There is a peculiar kind of gratuitousness in art that goes beyond the immediately perceivable. One initiates a creative process that stems from a unique representation, and yet the creative process finally exceeds the artist’s initial ‘intention’. It is as if ‘reality’ exceeds itself in its repetition, and that such excessiveness is part of the substance of things. The image exceeds the original and becomes just as original.⁶⁵⁹ It appears then, quoting Catherine Pickstock, that in ‘order to describe, we must have recourse to invocation’, and that this ‘anterior figural process is never completed, and is matched prospectively by an accompanying sense that more has yet to be said...[that] the gift of reality to us must be met by a counter-gift’.⁶⁶⁰ But in light of this, one could ask: if all ‘doing involves gratuitous

⁶⁵⁴ ‘Poetic and Religious Imagination,’ 179.

⁶⁵⁵ ‘The Standing of Poetry,’ 62.

⁶⁵⁶ ‘Poetic and Religious Imagination,’ 180. In an essay on R. S. Thomas, Williams has said that ‘we image/immerse/explore ourselves only by our immersion in what’s other – the life the structure of which the subject is neither centre nor essence,’ in Rowan Williams, ‘Adult Geometry: Dangerous Thoughts in R.S. Thomas,’ in M. Wynn Thomas (ed.), *The Page’s Drift: R.S. Thomas at Eighty* (Wales: Seren, 1993), 82-98 (p. 84).

⁶⁵⁷ ‘The Standing of Poetry,’ 57. It is worth consulting here the outstanding essay by Geoffrey Hill, entitled ‘Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’’. This can be found in *Collected Critical Writings*, (ed.) Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-20.

⁶⁵⁸ ‘Poetic and Religious Imagination,’ 179-180.

⁶⁵⁹ Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (2nd rev. ed., London and New York: Continuum, 1989), 130-138.

⁶⁶⁰ Pickstock, ‘Matter and Mattering,’ 607. She goes on to say that it ‘is as if a seascape naturally precipitates or demands an encomium, as naturally as it is shaped by swell and wave breaking. These poetic aspects of truth-making, it seems, covertly enter into our ordinary prosaic practices, and yet we are not attended by the sense that we are arbitrarily making things up or being dishonest as to the way things are. Do we rather feel that we are responding to the impress of reality, its imperatives?’ (607-608).

making',⁶⁶¹ and all true poetry 'adds to the stock of available reality' (R. P. Blackmur),⁶⁶² then how is one to understand this addition as being reflective of being-as-such, of what is *there* already?

To approach this, we should say initially that for Williams 'poetics' always works within restraints, within material or medial limitations. 'Absolute innovation is not possible. To add to the world, to extend the world and its possibilities, the artist has no option but to take his [or her] material from the world as it is'.⁶⁶³ One engages with an finite index that is *specific* and *concrete* – such as a tonal range, a unique density of words, or an ideation that emerges through the creative process. The artistic product cannot concern nothing-in-particular, nor can it accomplish everything. Creativity seeks a representation of aspects, as it has been produced within the interplay between the artist and the developing *habitus* of the artistic process. But this attempt at presentation (or re-presentation) does not render the subject matter merely self-identical or stable. The emergence of the artwork can set in motion a new chain of significance that includes a non-foreclosable range of meaning. For instance, a whole range of contingencies can alter our perception of the aesthetic object: a work produced in one context can register different overtones in another, and the movement of time can offer expanded valences. The work – especially the masterpiece – creates its own *before* and *after*; an event in which previous contributions are re-signified in light of the present addition, and sets in motion a different stage of consciousness that retrospectively alters our perception of its origins.⁶⁶⁴ Temporality remains essential to an unfolding aesthetic, whether in relation to the production or reception of the artwork itself.⁶⁶⁵

But it follows that the self-identity of the specific work can only be maintained through the differences that time and context provides, that is, insofar as it remains *non-identical* to itself. It is only through temporality that the aesthetic object can achieve its 'timelessness' or 'contemporaneity' with our own time,⁶⁶⁶ and it is precisely through its concreteness that the poem achieves its universality. For poetry, as for metaphysics, 'Being' is disclosed through the specificity of beings.⁶⁶⁷ Repetition and re-presentation implies a paradoxical difference and sameness which belongs to the objectivity of the poem. As Williams says 'The poetic embrace of the concrete is something more than the repetition or reproduction of what is

⁶⁶¹ Milbank, 'Scholasticism, Modernism and Modernity,' 668

⁶⁶² R. P. Blackmur, 'Statements and Idylls'. *Poetry* 46.2 (1935): 108-112 (p. 108).

⁶⁶³ 'Poetic and Religious Imagination,' 180.

⁶⁶⁴ As Pickstock says, 'any poem is in excess of any poetics, and may cause us to revise our ideas as to such a poetics' ('Matter and Mattering,' 617).

⁶⁶⁵ Cf. Rowan Williams, 'Art: Taking Time and Making Sense,' in T. Devonshire-Jones (ed.), *Images of Christ. Religious Iconography in Twentieth Century British Art. An Exhibition to mark the Centenary of St Matthew's Church, Northampton* (St Matthew's (Northampton) Centenary Art Committee, 1993), 25-27.

⁶⁶⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 119-124.

⁶⁶⁷ On this point, also see Joseph Bottum, 'Poetry and Metaphysics'. *Philosophy and Literature* 19.2 (1995): 214-225.

given; it evokes or realizes the given in a new way, it posits a new world which is the depth of the old, not by denying the particular and immediate but by seeking words for its unspoken setting, its setting within the presence of God'.⁶⁶⁸ Or as Pickstock writes: 'Repetition...is defined by non-identical variation because the universal is never sufficiently determinate as universal, and likewise, the particular never attains to sufficient determination as particular. And so it is the case that these two levels constantly interfere with one another in human discourse and have always already done so'. She goes on to say that 'Non-identical repetition does not serve to distinguish the way in which something is universal from the way in which it is particular, and so to deflate paradox. Rather, it reasserts a coincidence of the two to the point of apparent contradiction', and that 'One can only palliate this contradiction by playing through or inhabiting the never-ending tension of such coincidence in iterative, analogical variation'. For her, since we are present within 'the finite world, we must be reconciled to the perplexity of the interplay of the particular and universal which is the reflex of the incomprehensible grounding of the finite in the infinite'.⁶⁶⁹

In the Clark Lectures,⁶⁷⁰ Williams expounded an 'ontology of art' that grasped 'the labour of art as something rooted in the sense of an unfinishedness in 'ordinary' perception, a recognition that the objects of perception [are] not exhausted by what could be said about them in descriptive, rational and pragmatic terms'.⁶⁷¹ Such excess of 'perception' moves against a 'scheme where stimulus is followed by determinate response'. Instead, within our deepening perceptions, 'there [are] constantly more response[s] evoked'.⁶⁷² Art necessitates an attunement to the way things are, to the incompleteness of the world, and is not something imposed or exerted upon it. 'True art is in some sense a part of nature, nature in its human embodiment pursuing its natural intellectual and formative character'.⁶⁷³ As per the lexicon of 'grace' (as revealed in the title of this work), this is tied to the idea that beauty implies an 'excess'⁶⁷⁴, an 'overflow' or 'radiance' that addresses us, one which implies a 'metaphysical dimension' to creativity.⁶⁷⁵ This is because art outstrips the instrumentality of

⁶⁶⁸ Rowan Williams, 'Suspending the Ethical: R.S. Thomas and Kierkegaard,' in Damien Walford Davies (ed.), *Echoes to the Amen: Essays after R.S. Thomas* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2003), 206-219 (p. 218).

⁶⁶⁹ Pickstock, 'Matter and Mattering,' 612-613. She has dealt with this theme more expansively within her most recent monograph, namely *Repetition and Identity*. The Literary Agenda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). This work has suggestive insights on almost every page, and certainly deserves deeper engagement than is possible here.

⁶⁷⁰ Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London-New York: Continuum 2005).

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*, x.

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*, 135.

⁶⁷³ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 53 and *passim*.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

need⁶⁷⁶ and ‘the will’, even though it ‘unquestionably works on the [artist’s] will’ as well.⁶⁷⁷ This is what Williams means by ‘necessity’.⁶⁷⁸ He thus sees a connection between the tropes of ‘grace’ and ‘necessity’, because ‘the more connections [which] appear that do not belong simply to the artist’s will and decision, the more the work can embody both the freedom and necessity of the actual finite world and the material produced by the artist can communicate the excess of reality’.⁶⁷⁹ Art is not about ‘deciding to create this or that pattern, because that would reduce it to an act of will’. Instead, art has ‘more to do with intelligence than will’, and therefore ‘is bound to be exercised in relation to what is actual, since intelligence...is necessarily oriented towards being’.⁶⁸⁰ ‘The maker’s obedience is to the integrity of the thing made, to the unfolding logic in the process of making, as the work discloses itself’.⁶⁸¹

The work establishes connections between things, displaying links that exceed the arbitrariness of choice,⁶⁸² and require the exercise of ‘judgement’ on the part of the artist.⁶⁸³ Thus art seeks ‘to reshape the data of the world so as to make their fundamental structure and relation visible’, even suggesting startlingly that ‘the artist *does* set out to change the world, but – if we can manage the paradox – to change the world into itself’.⁶⁸⁴ ‘Art challenges the finality of appearance, the actual ‘conditions of existence’, not in order to destroy but to ground, amplify, fulfill.’⁶⁸⁵ It can never be simply ‘imitative’,⁶⁸⁶ but rather implies a non-identical perception of the aesthetic ‘object’. Artistry implies a correspondence to ‘the whole active presence of the object’ in which it is ‘being re-presented by the artist’, and is not

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid., 15

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 124.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 52. J. H. Prynne has spoken about how ‘the focus of poetic composition, as a text takes shape in the struggle of the poet to separate from it, projects into the textual arena an intense energy of conception and differentiation, pressed up against the limits which are discovered and invented by composition itself,’ in J. H. Prynne, ‘Poetic Thought,’ *Textual Practice* 24.4 (2010): 595-606 (p. 596). As a side note, Agamben has made the point that the link between ‘truth’ and ‘disclosure’ (*aletheia*) and ‘making’ (*poiesis*) was held from early on in philosophical thinking. This is however to be distinguished from another mode of reasoning which, under the influence of certain post-Aristotelian traditions, sought to relate *poiesis* to the will, a trajectory which reached its apogee in Nietzsche’s will-to-power. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, ‘Poiesis and Praxis,’ in *The Man without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1999), 63-93.

⁶⁸² Cf. J. H. Prynne, *Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words* (London: Birkbeck, 1993).

⁶⁸³ *Grace and Necessity*, 86. Also see the comments of Prynne: ‘To work with thought requires the poet to grasp at the strong and persistent ways in which understanding is put under test by imagination as a screen of poetic conscience, to coax and hurl at finesse and judgement, and to set beliefs and principles on line, self-determining but nothing for its own sake merely; all under test of how things are. Nothing taken for granted, nothing merely forced, pressure of the composing will as varied by delicacy, because these energies are dialectical and not extruded from personality or point of view. Dialectics in this sense is the working encounter with contradiction in the very substance of object-reality and the obduracy of thought; irony not as an optional tone of voice but as marker for intrinsic anomaly’ (Prynne, ‘Poetic Thought,’ 597).

⁶⁸⁴ *Grace and Necessity*, 17-18.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid., 18.

‘simply the *reproduction* of aspects of its appearance’.⁶⁸⁷ This is because the act of knowledge itself is already involved in a process of representation, which means that ‘whatever stimulus starts the process off is not adequately thought of as a fixed entity requiring no more than a single identification’.⁶⁸⁸ ‘Re-presentation assumes that there is excess in in what presents itself for knowing, and that neither the initial cluster of perceptions nor any one set of responses will finally succeed in containing what is known’.⁶⁸⁹ Such does not necessitate a post-Scotist and Kantian mode of mentalist representation,⁶⁹⁰ in which ‘there is a fixed ‘for itself’ hidden in what is perceived, standing over against the ‘for me’ dimension’. Rather ‘the inner life of a reality is what unfolds in time, generating more and more symbolic structures, not a timeless and relation-free definition’, whereby ‘the life of the object in the knowing mind is genuinely in some sense an aspect of the objects own life – not a construct by an independent thinking substance working on dead or static material presented to it as a determined set of data’.⁶⁹¹ For Williams, the world, through continuing refractions, continues to ‘‘make itself other’’.⁶⁹²

But from whence does this otherness appear? For Williams, it is ‘located in the *preconscious* life of the intellect’, namely, in ‘God’s formative mental activity within our own,’ in a ‘participatory awareness’ that is not expressed, at least initially, in ‘word or concept’.⁶⁹³ Such divine activity within the world registers doubts for Williams about any ‘pristine independent subjectivity’. There is always a blending of passivity and activity in our perceptions of the world, a sense of being ‘‘always already addressed, impressed, illuminated’, of being ‘acting upon, processing and transforming raw data’. Such a contention proposes a demythologization of our ‘modern epistemology’ that creates a dualism between ‘the innocent receptacle of the disinterested mind and the uninterpreted data of external reality’.⁶⁹⁴ We need to move away from a model of there being non-intelligent stuff *out there* upon which our structures are simply added. On the contrary, there is an intelligent construction as regards things-as-such. Materiality and significance are intimately connected,

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid., 138.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid., 139. Also see the extensive discussion on ‘representation’ in *The Edge of Words*, 186-197.

⁶⁹⁰ Olivier Boulnois, *Être et représentation: Une généalogie de la métaphysique moderne à l’époque de Duns Scot (XIIIe -XIVe siècle)*, 505-515. Épipiméthée (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999). One can also compare comments made by Williams on ‘sign-making’ and his rejection of ‘crude representationalism’, in Rowan Williams, ‘Christian Art and Cultural Pluralism: Reflections on “L’art de l’icone”’, by Paul Evdokimov’. *Eastern Churches Review* 8.1 (1976): 38-44 (p. 40).

⁶⁹¹ *Grace and Necessity*, 139-140.

⁶⁹² Ibid., 156.

⁶⁹³ Ibid., 23-24.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., 24.

and cannot be considered independently.⁶⁹⁵ As Williams repeats again and again, “things are not only what they are’ but ‘give more than they have’”.⁶⁹⁶

This plenitude of signification is linked to the idea that art is able ‘to bring out relations and dimensions that ordinary rational naming and analysing fail to represent’.⁶⁹⁷ Such is predicated on the analogical connections or ‘proportions’ that exist between things, ‘a sense of objects as it were carrying with them a charge of feeling that links them to other objects’, as can be seen in music, where there are ‘intrinsic relations and proportions in the world of sound’ and in poetry, in which the play of ‘metaphor’ is able to undermine our simplistic notions of ‘self-contained entities’, making it appear that different objects are operating on a similar “frequency”. Here we could even speak of ‘[a] *participation* between different agencies’,⁶⁹⁸ here intimating an ‘ontological depth’ under ‘the surface of appearances’,⁶⁹⁹ or what he calls ‘the interconnectedness of reality’ itself.⁷⁰⁰ For him, there is a real sense that if ‘you cannot place a perception, a specific thing, in the context of its resonances and formal echoes, you cannot place it at all’.⁷⁰¹

Williams’s Thomistic Hegelianism is fully on display here.⁷⁰² But it also reflects a historicized Platonism: as he says, ‘the part of the material world that is the human system of knowing cannot be spoken of except as a spiral of self-extending symbolic activity; its relation to its environment is inescapably mobile, time-related’. Moreover, ‘There is no way of abstracting from the passage of time some necessary, non-revisable and exhaustive correlation between inside and outside, a set of determinate, entirely ‘objective’ stimuli and a ‘correct’ reception of and reaction to them’. This is because what ‘you can meaningfully say is constrained by what is given’. And yet, ‘truthfulness unfolds – it doesn’t happen all at once – and makes possible different levels of appropriating or sharing in the activity that is the world,’ which implies ‘a sense of the real as active, rather than static, a mobile pattern whose best analogy is indeed musical and not mechanical’. The Platonic parallels are not lost on him:

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., 75.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid., 26. The quote is taken from Maritain.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid., 28

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., 28-29.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid., 76-77. ‘A symbol,’ for Williams, ‘is intrinsically bound up with the relations of things sensed and lodged in the subject, it is part of a system of seeing or absorbing what is there; and so it necessarily generates further symbolic connections, not merely a repeatable, generalizable response (ibid., 136).

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid., 89. Speaking of Frances O’Connor, Williams writes that ‘the artist takes the risk of uncovering the world within the world of visible things as a way of ‘doing justice’, confident because of her commitment that what is uncovered will be the ‘reason’ in things, a consonance that is well beyond any felt sense harmony or system of explanation but is simply a coherence and connectedness always more than can be seen or expressed’ (ibid., 100).

⁷⁰¹ Ibid., 77.

⁷⁰² Pickstock, ‘Matter and Mattering,’ 615.

The relation between knower and known envisaged here is remarkably similar to the ‘participation’ spoken of in a more traditional idiom of scholastic and Platonic thinking. There is some activity which, beginning in the object known, continues to exercise a characteristic mode of life in another medium: the material in which it is first embodied does not exhaust the formal life that is at work. The ‘what’ of what is known is not something that belongs to the given shape we begin with in our perception; it extends possibilities, or even, to use a question-begging word, *invites* response that will continue and reform its life, its specific energy.⁷⁰³

This is what Milbank is referring to when he speaks of Williams’s metaphysics as proposing an ‘intra-finite “horizontal” participation’⁷⁰⁴ that reflects a ‘vertical’ participation in the being of the Logos’. It is this that helps explicate the ‘analogical resonance or *convenientia* between things’ as they appear within the world.⁷⁰⁵ Williams, however, is more blatantly historicist and Hegelian in his approach, more so than Platonic realism would suggest. His position is a kind of transcendence of ‘realism’⁷⁰⁶ altogether since for Williams ‘the act of understanding and representation is bound up with the actual life of the material order’, and because this order intimates an incompleteness, then one could conclude ‘the implication that world is not yet as it ‘really’ is’. Williams suggestively adds that ‘There is the possible hidden assumption...that the world’s reality is always asymptotically approaching its fullness by means of the response of imagination – the assumption of an ‘ideal’ fullness of perception in which things reach their destiny’.⁷⁰⁷

But what is the nature of this ‘destiny’? Williams has said elsewhere regarding Hegel that ‘all that is *said* about [the] *telos* has a necessarily quasi-fictional character’ about it, in the sense that ‘the *telos* is not *representable* (not present) in the structure of any given historical

⁷⁰³ *Grace and Necessity*, 137-138.

⁷⁰⁴ John Milbank, ‘Scholasticism, Modernism and Modernity’. *Modern Theology* 22.4 (2006): 651-671 (p. 660).

⁷⁰⁵ ‘Williams talks about how art most of all shows how things are “more than themselves”, so also he talks...about how the work of art “participates” in its antecedents and both realises and discloses complex and hidden webs of “participation” [so that] “vertical” participation and analogy in his theology are echoed in horizontal structures of an ineffable *convenientia*, including those that pertain between being and knowing’ (ibid., 660).

⁷⁰⁶ The term ‘reality’ (*realitas*) was largely generated by Duns Scotus – though there are earlier precursors – and is connected to his preference for formalist ‘representation’ of *res* as *non-nihil*, that is, as a levelling schema that places all ‘being’ within the same formal plane of being as ‘not-nothing’. This was predicated on the idea – developed by Scotus, Suárez and later by Wolff – that ‘reality’ concerned possible ‘essences’ which were conceived independently of their actual existence, and which were simply ‘mirrored’ within representation. For this genealogy, see Jean-Francois Courtine, ‘Reality,’ in Barbara Cassin (ed.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 879-887; Olivier Boulnois, ‘Object, Objective Being,’ in *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, 723-725; Boulnois, *Être et représentation*, 88-105, 505-515; Boulnois, ‘L’invention de la réalité’. *Quaestio: Journal of the History of Metaphysics* 17 (2017): 133-154.

⁷⁰⁷ *Grace and Necessity*, 153-154.

consciousness or set of consciousnesses, not *a* meaning which a speaker or writer could articulate as a piece of communicable information'.⁷⁰⁸ But beyond these caveats, Williams suggests that the 'constant pattern of 'making other' that runs through the reality of artistic encounters', that pattern in which the world of objects are constantly 're-forming, re-embodying' themselves into 'something radically different' is something ontologically fundamental, and that if we 'suppose...at the heart of this or at the end of the tracing of it to its first principles lies an ultimate sameness, simply an endless interiority within the world', then that 'ought to strike us as in some way jarring'.⁷⁰⁹ For him, as a Christian theologian, this continuing 'making other' suggests an eternal dance of identity and difference that has been named as the trinity.⁷¹⁰ Such a God expresses a 'radical' and 'self-dispossessing' love not only in the timeless relations of Father, Son and Spirit, but also as regards creation. Here 'the world comes into being' in a manner that is 'gratuitous' and 'continuous', in an analogous way to 'the order of the divine mind', and does not therefore imply a fundamental 'change' to God's being *ad intra*.⁷¹¹ And this world in turn, because it is caused by and exists within God, continues to reflect this reality within its own life as a form of continuous self-othering and creative production.

The above summary of Williams's account of creativity has attempted to lay out some of the basic assumptions which will be repeated later in his reflections on language and analogy. But already, he has shown how the elementary factor of historical movement, namely change and our progressive advance through time, has significant ontological implications. We have been made aware of how ordinary perceptions are filled with a profound level of depth that

⁷⁰⁸ Williams, 'Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity,' in *Wrestling with Angels*, 25-34 (p. 29).

⁷⁰⁹ *Grace and Necessity*, 157. Milbank dilates this even more: '[If] we were to suppose that "making other" were confined within finite immanence, then, [Williams] suggests, being as a whole would be an inert self-identity not subject to artistic disclosure. The atheistic or pantheistic supposition might allow art within the world, but at its margins art would be as it were cancelled, revealed as a less than serious kind of play. To *remain* with the implications of art and poetry, Williams avers, we have to allow that finite reality as such can become endlessly other to itself in a kind of finality beyond finality that implies, indeed, a "first mover"' (Milbank, 'Scholasticism, Modernism and Modernity,' 660).

⁷¹⁰ *Grace and Necessity*, 159: 'God in the intrinsic 'necessity' of the divine life itself (constrained by nothing but the character of divine love and liberty) generates the eternal other, the partner of divine action, the Word or Son, and also the bearer of the inexhaustibility of divine life who is defined neither as Father nor as Son but simply as Spirit (so that divine life is not enclosed in a simple relations of logical opposition or symmetry).' Williams, in several other places, has sought to expand upon this kenotic and self-dispossessing reading of the trinity, in line with several thinkers. The following are a sample: Williams, 'Sapientia and the Trinity: Reflections on *De Trinitate*,' in: Bernard Bruning, Mathijs Lamberigts and J. van Houtem (eds.), *Collectanea Augustiniana: Mélanges T J van Bavel*, vol. 1 (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1990), 317-332; Williams, 'What does Love Know? St. Thomas on the Trinity. *New Blackfriars* 82.964 (2001): 260-272; Williams, 'The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure,' in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds.), *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115-135; Williams, 'Balthasar and the Trinity,' in Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37-50; Williams, *A Margin of Silence: The Holy Spirit in Russian Orthodox Theology* (Québec: Éditions du Lys Vert, 2008).

⁷¹¹ *Grace and Necessity*, 158-159.

exceeds our immediate grasp. Williams argued that poetics is itself an intensified form of this perception more generally, and that in order to save appearances, one needs a metaphysical supplementation that makes sense of these disclosures. That is, how is one to make sense of the paradox of difference and identity, as it appears in representation? How is it that the work of art ‘exceeds’ the intentions of the artist, and so takes on a life of its own? How is one to explain that apparent ‘fittingness’ between mind and world? And why does language give us an adequate access to reality? Might it be that reality itself remains strangely generative and intelligent in its very essence?

7.1.2 On Language

Williams’s Gifford Lectures aimed to investigate how ‘the very way we speak and think can be heard as raising a question about the kind of universe this is, and thus about where and how language about God comes in’.⁷¹² Like *Grace and Necessity*, he explored how ‘the significance of perceptions’ – and their defiance of ‘any stimulus-response pattern’⁷¹³ – can be deepened more fully, finally showing that our ordinary processes of ‘making sense’ require a metaphysical dimension in order to be comprehended.⁷¹⁴ What is required is ‘a metaphysics that thinks of matter itself as invariably and necessarily communicative’ and ‘not as a sheer passivity moulded by our minds into an intelligible structure’.⁷¹⁵ Such a view implies that material reality is “‘always already’ language-saturated and language-bound’.⁷¹⁶ He therefore rejects any ‘world beyond language’ or ‘word/world dualism’ that ‘encourages us to think of language as the labelling of a passive environment’.⁷¹⁷

Williams’s own project aims to steer between those styles of natural theology in which God is simply ‘waiting’ to be discovered by a purely rationalist reflection,⁷¹⁸ and a revelational theology (à la Barth) that holds divine disclosure to have little actual connection to the kind of cosmos we inhabit, as if revelation could be territorialized to a mythical ‘outside’ (‘a simple model of divine utterance – an otherworldly agent providing otherwise inaccessible information’, as Williams puts it⁷¹⁹). Rather, a practicable natural theology should be focused on ‘the recognition that a faithful description of the world we inhabit involves [the] taking into account of whatever pressures [move] us to respond to our environment by gesturing

⁷¹² *The Edge of Words*, xi

⁷¹³ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷¹⁴ *Ibid.*, x. Williams argument is that our ways of ‘talking about God is not a marginal eccentricity in human language but something congruent with the more familiar and less noticed oddities of how we speak’ (*ibid.*, x).

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

towards a *context* for the description we have been engaged in', as this appears through 'a cluster of models and idioms and practices working quite differently from the discourse we have so far been operating [in], and without which our 'normal' repertoire of practice would not finally make sense'.⁷²⁰ And if such a pressure yields to 'the horizon of further questioning' – which is 'unlimited in prospect' – then we could conceive this unconstrained expanse, this 'indeterminate diversity of representational possibility', as evoking 'a shadow of the image of an infinite flow of activity' that could be adjectivized as 'generosity'⁷²¹ and 'intelligence', since such is 'literally the only phenomenon in the universe that makes sense of the overall direction of material existence towards coherent, sustainable, innovative, adaptable forms'.⁷²²

This again does not involve an extraneous impulse on our part, a willful imposition upon the disarray, but rather indicates a continuing 'participation' between objects themselves, as well as the knowing subject who represents them. Such 'representation', again, does not imply a simple mirroring 'reproduction' but rather displays that inherent amenability of the world to be carried into 'another medium', one that does not require an exact likeness (since repetition, as we emphasized earlier, does not necessitate tautology).⁷²³ This means that what-is-thought is related to, but not identical to, the object perceived. It can take on another 'form' in which some 'aspect of what is perceived' can 'be read into another moment in our seeing and speaking'. We are not simply dealing with "raw" material', 'a set of wholly discrete monads' or 'mutually oppositional moments', but instead 'a continuum of 'analogical' relations in which we can speak of one thing in terms of another', that is, 'of participation existing between not only object and object in the world but between object and representing subject'. On such a model, any one object can "come to be" *differently*, and is not blandly self-identical.⁷²⁴ We thus continually, through the simple act of knowing and representing, 'make things other than themselves'.⁷²⁵

Representation is not then 'something which comes *between* a reality and its apprehension by a subject – a sort of obstacle or substitute for the real thing.' One should instead

⁷²⁰ Ibid., 8. Williams goes on to show how this project has a kinship with Aquinas' own *quinque viae* (ibid., 10-14).

⁷²¹ Ibid., 32. See cf. 170

⁷²² Ibid. 102.

⁷²³ For more on this non-dualistic matrix of representation, and its connections to the dynamics of allegory, see Graham Ward, 'Transcendence and Representation,' in Regina Schwartz (ed.), *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 127-147. The essay is relevant insofar as it situates the 'representation' within a genealogy of the sublime.

⁷²⁴ *The Edge of Words*, 20.

⁷²⁵ Ibid., 60. Also see his reflections on pp. 121-125 which repeat some of the insights contained *Grace and Necessity*, though now with a distinctly Milbankian tone (in light of his reading of 'Scholasticism, Modernism and Modernity').

understand it as ‘the ‘thereness of the object in relation to the perceiver’⁷²⁶, as an activity which ‘*performs* what it refers to’, and ‘enacts the mutual investment of subject and object’,⁷²⁷ which ‘claims that for any element in the environment in which we live, there is an irreducible...dimension of its reality which is *its life in speaking and thinking*’.⁷²⁸ By adopting the language of ‘representation’, Williams is rejecting a ‘pure postmodern dualism...of compromised speech and silent, formless, non-historical interiority’ and ‘a pre-critical revival of would-be simple representation, representation without mediation’⁷²⁹ – that is, in a naïve belief in ‘the immediate datum of perception’.⁷³⁰ The act of representing should not be confused with ‘imitating or substituting’, since ‘the character of mediation’ is that which ‘enables us to recognize our act in the other, and the other’s act in us, and the need to understand truth as more than the correspondence of formal elements in a structure’⁷³¹ (as found in mainstream ‘realism’). ‘Representation’ does not imply a mirror effect, a direct imaging of the world without linguistic and affective mediation, but is always a non-identical repetition of our perceptions in a different form, perceptions which are themselves never neutral or value-free, but always a *seeing-as*, that is, a seeing of something in particular.⁷³² This means that our attempts at reference are always over-determined by a historical and linguistic density that defies an unmediated perspective.

But it should be added that this ever-increasing ‘density of reference’ does not mean that communication is without limits. There is a sense in which material limitation affects our language-usage – our physical capabilities and language-mastery included. But there is an additional valence given in the fact that the continuing accretion of historico-linguistic deposits means that we cannot just signify whatever we please. To say anything, is ‘to set it in the context of the echoes and resonances that come with utterance’.⁷³³ Such implies an interpenetration between ‘freedom’ and ‘determination’: ‘The unceasing effort to re-work perceptions as our means of exploring what it is for something to be ‘there’ for us is both free, in the sense that it is never accounted for by an energy-impulse exchange model, and deeply constrained, in the sense that we are always trying to allow what is there to show itself’.⁷³⁴ We are thus always placed in an ‘environment’ that is ‘irreducibly charged with intelligence’ in which there is a ‘mutual adjustment and readjustment of meaningful communications and

⁷²⁶ Ibid., 191.

⁷²⁷ Ibid., 194.

⁷²⁸ Ibid., 194-195.

⁷²⁹ Ibid., 193.

⁷³⁰ Ibid., 194.

⁷³¹ Ibid., 196-197.

⁷³² For some reflections on this phenomenological *sine qua non*, see Graham Ward, *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don’t* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013). Further commentary can be found in Khegan Delpont, ‘Why Faith Makes Sense: On Graham Ward’s *Unbelievable*’, *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3.1 (2017): 515-545.

⁷³³ *The Edge of Words*, 54.

⁷³⁴ Ibid., 60.

intelligence receptors'.⁷³⁵ This basic over-determination within our linguistic engagements is visible even at an elementary level, since 'we cannot ever simply say the same words twice with absolutely precisely the same meaning'.⁷³⁶ Here 'the passage of *time* makes a difference' whereby 'What is said, performed, enacted becomes 'material' to the next utterance and performance, so that this latter cannot be in any very interesting sense the same'.⁷³⁷ As such, there remains 'an irreversible trajectory in language' in which 'what has been said cannot be unsaid, and what is now to be said has to reckon not only with the environment as such but with the speech of others which makes the environment we encounter always already *represented*'. 'The world we inhabit is already a symbolized world, a world that has been taken up into a process of speaking and making sense together',⁷³⁸ and is a world in which 'Performance generates new possibilities of performances'.⁷³⁹

This is exemplified by Margaret Masterman's essay on metaphysics and ideographs⁷⁴⁰ (which Williams draws heavily on⁷⁴¹). In the construction of ideographical signs, one begins with a simple item, such as the word 'Play'. This word while evidencing a 'basic indeterminacy'⁷⁴² is subject to a form of 'Progressive Definition' through repeated usage. One repeats the word 'Play', within temporal gaps, and eventually one infers an 'indexical' reference, so that we can talk of '*that* Play', since 'past performance contributes to present meaning'.⁷⁴³ Metaphysical and ideographical language abstracts from particularity, from the "this", 'here', and 'now', towards more 'universal' forms of designation,⁷⁴⁴ from unitary 'statements' towards 'clusters' of implication that set this specificity within an ever-widening context of meaning. The generalized context abstracted from particulars is then condensed into words that are 'the simplest possible, the most compact, the simplest, the most stark'.⁷⁴⁵ Metaphysics and ideographs thus *extend* the scope of 'statements', and *reduce* them so that 'sufficiently specific meaning is attained'.⁷⁴⁶ Within this remit, the word 'Play' may come to refer to a universal activity extracted from a horizon of complexity and implication. This complexity, in turn, can extend into the paradoxical where seemingly opposing concepts can be mutually implicated, which might appear contradictory to those unaware of the network of

⁷³⁵ Ibid., 64.

⁷³⁶ Ibid., 67.

⁷³⁷ Ibid., 68.

⁷³⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁷³⁹ Ibid., 75.

⁷⁴⁰ Margaret Masterman, 'Metaphysical and Ideographic Language,' in C. A. Mace (ed.), *British Philosophy in the Mid-Century* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), 283-357.

⁷⁴¹ *The Edge of Words*, 105-108.

⁷⁴² 'Metaphysical and Ideographic Language,' 333.

⁷⁴³ Ibid., 334.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid., 314-315.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid., 342.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid., 316.

meanings that any one concept might imply.⁷⁴⁷ For example, the Christian confession that ‘God is One’ and ‘God is Three’ is only contradictory if one remains ignorant of the environment that gave rise to its usage; it should not therefore be rejected as simple nonsense, as in logical positivism.

For Williams, this continual building-up of historical meaning implies that we can never be isolated speakers, but are always socialized in our interactions, being subject to the constraints and plenitudes of human exchange.⁷⁴⁸ Linguistic objects present themselves in a ‘three-dimensional’ manner that implies a certain level of ‘resistance’ which assumes ‘a convergence of different possible points of view and points where resistance is met’.⁷⁴⁹ On this reading, any ‘coherent material object’ comes to be ‘through a fairly intricate interplay of processes’, so that such an object is ‘always already ‘saturated’ with the workings of mind’, and therefore cannot be abstracted from ‘the means we are using to examine it’.⁷⁵⁰ As such, there can be no ‘isolated subjects acting on each other in a void’, nor can this process be reduced to ‘mechanical interactions’ on the part of a biological machine’.⁷⁵¹ Rather, since we live in a world in which ‘matter’ is ‘inherently ‘symbolic’ – a ‘cosmos of interacting signals’ – this indicates that we are ‘engaged with and [are] in a shared situation’. ‘We know what we know as something always already known by another’, so that our ‘attempts to characterize/represent a situation in speech will therefore be diverse: not chaotic or vague, but equally not reducible to the single authoritative reproduction of some basic structure’. Such means that to be ‘truthful’ is to ‘find a way of speaking that does maximal justice to the diversity and plurality of a situation’.⁷⁵² But it also implies that we take seriously the assertion that ‘the entire system of the universe’ is ‘an intelligible *whole*’, that is, we should read it ‘as ‘a’ world’. As Williams goes on to suggest, this intelligible whole might reflect to us the fact that there is an intelligent mind that gives rationality to this order.⁷⁵³

Williams’s reflections on the inherently additive nature of language leads him to conclude that ‘Extreme or apparently excessive speech is not an aberration in our speaking’.⁷⁵⁴ Instead he suggests if our very speaking concerns an attunement to the material world, then this tells us that the world is always in excess to itself, that there is a ‘complexity we are always catching up’ to. Our attempts at comprehensiveness will continually fall short of their ideal, since it is herein that we encounter ‘the ‘difficulty’ of the world, its complex resistance to

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid., 283-314.

⁷⁴⁸ *The Edge of Words*, 81-86.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid., 98.

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid., 101.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid., 104.

⁷⁵² Ibid., 117.

⁷⁵³ Ibid., 118.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid., 130.

exhaustive description'.⁷⁵⁵ But what does this excessiveness tell us about this reality as such? As Williams has reiterated again and again, it means that if 'intelligence is fundamental to our apprehension of our environment', and that there is no "mindless' materiality', then we are in 'an important sense 'addressed' by what we encounter'. "Extreme' utterance presupposes that only when the fullest imaginable range of allusion and cross-reference has been explored do we begin to be capable of 'precision', because only then do we see what it actually means for some agency within our experience to come into speech'.⁷⁵⁶ This requires a certain '*faith in language*',⁷⁵⁷ a trust that our speaking contains 'resources beyond its immediate referential vocabulary', and 'treating our words as vehicles of an energy beyond them', 'disclosing futures we had not consciously imagined'.⁷⁵⁸ And if such language is inherently social and produced through a multiplicity of perceptions, then one could suggest that it appears 'as if 'Being' itself were in effect the irreducible otherness of speakers, the complex of inexhaustible potential for relatedness'.⁷⁵⁹

But what happens when words stop? What are we left with? Williams suggests that no 'silence' is 'pure absence' since we 'cannot imagine an 'unframed' or pure silence', but only a 'silence in which *we* are not hearing anything, not hearing what we might expect to hear'.⁷⁶⁰ Silence is never value-free, so that the assumption that silence communicates nothing is not valid. There is always a context in which non-speech occurs, which further implies that not all silence is 'justifiable'. We have to look at where this stoppage occurs and the kind of language it 'interrupts or refuses'. That means that 'the way in which silence 'comes in' should be something to do with admitting the most formidable level of difficulty',⁷⁶¹ that is, where language reaches an aporia, where it begins to "break down".⁷⁶² When this 'incompleteness' or 'difficulty' is stressed, this does not necessarily imply 'a failure exactly', but rather shows 'that *this* is one way in which language copes with *this* sort of difficulty, by naming the bare fact that it is difficult'.⁷⁶³ 'Silence is significant because of where and how it comes in, and so is arrived at by a variety of 'strategies'' which are 'meaningless without the silence they induce'. But it also means that 'silence is equally meaningless without the time

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid., 143.

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid., 147. On p. 148, he writes that this 'means in practice that when we invoke a God's eye perspective as our final horizon on the world, we are, in that very act, acknowledging the always receding horizon of our knowing; we are recognizing that representation for us has no end, because we cannot occupy the entire range of possible perspectives from something can be seen. And, whatever God knows, it is not the ensemble of finite perspectives but something of another order.'

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid., 146.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid., 152.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid., 155.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid., 156-157.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid., 162.

⁷⁶² Ibid., 179.

⁷⁶³ Ibid., 163-164.

taken to arrive at it, the particular narrative of its achievement'.⁷⁶⁴ This interrelation between speech and silence leads Williams to question any privileging of silence over speech as regards 'truth-telling', since 'speech points into silence and is itself altered by it'.⁷⁶⁵ For Christian and mystical speech, this has traditionally be associated with the naming of God, with the fact that God does not exist as a definitive 'object' within history – since he is both *innominabile* or *omninominabile* – a fact which reveals the 'time-and-matter-bound nature' of language more generally.⁷⁶⁶

The significance of this incapacity, on the part of language, does not mean that communication itself is 'some kind of 'fallen', distorting medium or activity'. It is 'finite and historical', and therefore has an 'unfinished character' – a sense of 'what has not *yet* been said' – but it is not thereby 'intrinsically corrupt'.⁷⁶⁷ Speech about what is difficult is continually primed to be 'paradoxical and baffling', implicating us in a 'suspension' of 'our habitual words' so that a new kind of language can 'emerge'.⁷⁶⁸ This continual 'suspension' of usual patterns has a moral aspect to it as well: 'it is not simply [about] God's existence' but also 'the existence and survival of a certain kind of *humanity*'. Williams makes this conclusion because he believes that there are 'Versions of humanity and of human language which, deliberately or not, work towards excising some of the difficulties involved in [speaking of the human self]', and are 'hostile to that account of humanity which sees it as basically *accountable*, engaged in growth, risk, love', and in a practice of 'shaping itself in relation to what is given'.⁷⁶⁹ Such might also hold in check those 'shapeless ideas of liberty and autonomy',⁷⁷⁰ that have come dominate our popular discourses.

Williams's argument has served to show that the material practices of language-usage and language-creation are not irruptions into an otherwise non-intelligent matrix. For him, materiality itself is imbued with symbolic resonance and capability that defies any reductively immanent account. To say or think anything involves oneself in a deeply profound undercurrent of meaning that is only rarely brought to the surface consciously. There is an ever-expanding range of significance that is implicated in every act of speaking and thinking we engage in. There is no dualism for Williams between the material and the metaphysical, the immanent and the transcendent, the temporal and non-temporal: we are rather given a framework in which the symbolic excess of being is reflective of the nature of the cosmos, and therefore of the divine life in which all things participate and have their being. With this participatory structure in place, we are ready to approach Williams's account of analogy.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 162-163.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁷⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 167-168.

⁷⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁷⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 197.

7.1.3. On Analogy

Throughout the previous two sections, there have been various hints at a more substantive account of analogy that underlies Williams's tangential commentary. In various places, there have been allusions to analogy as providing insights regarding the real proportion between mind and world, or the affinity between objects that implies an intersection between vertical and horizontal modes of participation. However, it is worth expanding Williams's own take on analogy, and its impingements on metaphysics. Here it can be said that one will not find a text where Williams expounds his own systematic account of analogy as such. The closest one comes to this are 'Balthasar and Difference'⁷⁷¹ and 'Dialectic and Analogy'.⁷⁷²

The argument of the former, like many of Williams's other texts in *Wrestling with Angels*, aims to counteract a postmodern disavowal of 'representation', here understood by critical theorists as a drive towards 'identity and totality'.⁷⁷³ Williams is thinking specifically of Derrida and his assertion of that *différance* which indicates 'the unsayable'.⁷⁷⁴ But he reckons that Derrida and others (e.g. Lyotard) have not really been captured by difference. Instead in their 'refusal of a relation between same and other', they have produced 'another kind of reduction to the same', a postmodern sublimity of the unrepresentable.⁷⁷⁵ Their project remains 'curiously disincarnate' in its denial of human 'dialogue', and 'the temporal conflicts and resistances of 'ordinary' interpersonal exchange'.⁷⁷⁶ In contrast to this, one needs to conceptualize 'a difference that is both simultaneous and interactive, a difference that allows temporal change, reciprocity of action', and which avoids all 'varieties of totalization'.⁷⁷⁷ It is here that the *analogia entis* comes to its own, especially as mediated through Balthasar and Nicholas of Cusa's *non aliud*.⁷⁷⁸

⁷⁷¹ Williams, 'Balthasar and Difference,' in *Wrestling with Angels*, 77-85.

⁷⁷² Williams, 'Dialectic and Analogy: A Theological Legacy,' in Nicholas Adams (ed.), *The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 274-292.

⁷⁷³ 'Balthasar and Difference,' 77.

⁷⁷⁴ For Derrida, 'If there is speech, there is the unsayable, simply because speech cannot be everything, cannot escape its mobile, anarchic temporality, cannot do other than reflect itself and rework itself. But what is unsayable is strictly unsayable, not to be gestured towards in a timidly religious way. There is no relation between the same and the other, the said the unsayable. The one is not even the 'opposite' of the other, as it cannot belong in one frame with it at any point' (ibid., 78).

⁷⁷⁵ For on the way that the *analogia entis* resists the post-Kantian, post-Lyotardian sublime, see John R. Betz, 'Beyond the Sublime: The Aesthetics of the Analogy of Being (Part One)', *Modern Theology* 21.3 (2005): 367-411; 'Beyond the Sublime: The Aesthetics of the Analogy Of Being (Part Two)', *Modern Theology* 22.1 (2006): 1-50.

⁷⁷⁶ 'Balthasar and Difference,' 78-79. The argument that Derridean ontology leads to the elision of ontological difference has been put forward in more detail by Catherine Pickstock in *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 1-46.

⁷⁷⁷ 'Balthasar and Difference,' 79.

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid., 80.

But how does Williams understand the *analogia entis* more substantively? He begins with a qualification: ‘Analogy is...emphatically *not* a correspondence between two or more things exhibiting in varying degrees the same features, as if God had a very great deal of good and creatures steadily diminishing qualities of the same’, for ‘There is no system of which God and creatures are both part’, since they cannot be ‘moments in one story’. He denies that the *analogia entis* implies an ontotheology – in the sense implied by Heidegger.⁷⁷⁹ – as if the participatory relation between God and creatures were simply an amplification of common traits. On the contrary, the analogy of being is predicated on a radical *difference* between Being and beings, which cannot be occluded without undermining the unfathomable interval between created and uncreated. These comments are qualifications regarding the doctrine of analogy; but more positively stated, what can we say about it? Using language inflected by Balthasar, he argues that

It is the active presence of the divine liberty, love and beauty precisely within the various and finite reality of material/temporal reality. ‘The divine’ is not present in creation in the form of ‘hints of transcendence’, points in the created order where finitude and creatureliness appear to thin out or open to a mysterious infinity, but in creation being itself – which includes, paradigmatically, creation being itself in unfinishedness, time-taking, pain and death. The crucified Jesus is, in this context, the ground and manifestation of what analogy means.⁷⁸⁰

Such means the material processes whereby language of God is produced is not about ‘denying undialectically the realities of time’, so that we ‘arrive at an apt rhetoric for the divine’. Rather it is by ‘working with the modalities of talk about time’ that ‘the timeless (that is, in concretely theological terms, the faithful, always active) reality of reciprocal differentiations of trinitarian life is brought to view’. For Williams, temporality and historicity are not excluded from metaphysics and the doctrine of analogy: ‘God is not to be spoken of by denying contingency’, since ‘The mysterious difference of God is never an abstract otherness defined simply by the negation of predicates of contingent being’. To think God’s transcendence in this way would actually imply a subtle denunciation: for ‘if divine difference were the negation of all finite predicates, God would be the other belonging to a discourse about the finite world. God’s life would be subsumed under that of the world, the antithesis of

⁷⁷⁹ On the Heidegger, ontotheology and the *analogia entis*, see John R. Betz, ‘Translator’s Introduction,’ in Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis. Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2013), 76-83. Also see Jean-François Courtine, *Inventio analogiae: Métaphysique et ontothéologie* (Paris: Vrin, 2005), 45-107.

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid.

the world's thesis; and out of such a discourse, no possible language for divine freedom or love could be generated'.⁷⁸¹

Similar trajectories are present in the second essay. However, rather than focusing on postmodern aversions to representation, 'Dialectic and Analogy' is penned against the background of post-Kantian and Romantic ideas of subjectivity. These are particularly related to Barthian worries about how the 'ego' has served as the 'pre-existing constant' over-against which God's being is contrasted.⁷⁸² One's starting point, already at the outset, subordinates God to a finite measure of proportion – a decision which taints any outcome, no matter how far one extends the chain of measuring, even unto infinity.⁷⁸³ For Barth, the God conceived along these lines could be hardly less than 'a fantastically deferred and re-routed vision of a human form of mental life' that is supposedly 'reconciled with its own unlimited possibilities'.⁷⁸⁴ Barth's concern is that the knowledge of 'truth' should stem from 'a process or activity that is not generated by the finite subject, whether in terms of ideas or 'experiences''.⁷⁸⁵ It is for this reason that Barth emphasizes the importance of God's self-revelation as being the only basis for a theology worthy of its name.

In this regard, Barth's negative antipode is Hegel, who exemplifies this trajectory which he desires to counter. Williams contemporizes this through an interpretation of Hegel offered by Conor Cunningham, which proposes that Hegel collapses all difference into a univocal grammar, in that each distinct thing is defined by a relation to *what it is not*. Everything is determined by its shadowy and non-existent opposite, an alternate reality of sublime vacuity – which is the highest instance of univocal predication.⁷⁸⁶ Williams suggests that these concerns are centered on the problem of analogy, in that Hegel's metaphysics (as read by Cunningham and others) cannot sustain a vision of ontological difference. Williams contests this reading,

⁷⁸¹ Ibid., 83. A longer and more dense study on the relation between the question of historicity and analogical metaphysics can be found in Lorenz Puntel, *Analogie und Geschichtlichkeit I: Philosophiegeschichtlich-Kritischer Versuch über das Grundproblem der Metaphysik* (Freiburg, Basel and Wien: Herder, 1969). For some historical background for this argument in this monograph, see the historical treatment given in Vincent Holzer, 'Les thomismes de langue allemande au xxe siècle: science de l'être et métamorphoses du transcendantal'. *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 97.1 (2013): 37-58. Holzer makes the point that many German Catholics, especially those who rely heavily on Kant and Heidegger, to a lesser or greater degree, are unconsciously influenced in their reading of Aquinas by a kind of crypto-Suárezian ontology in which the study of general being is separated from particular being itself (e.g. God-as-Being), a tendency that operates in accordance with the distinction between *metaphysica generalis* and *metaphysica specialis*.

⁷⁸² 'Dialectic and Analogy,' 274.

⁷⁸³ This argument has deep similarities with Aquinas's rejection of an analogy of proportion as a legitimate option for Christian metaphysics, as we saw in a previous chapter.

⁷⁸⁴ 'Dialectic and Analogy,' 276.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid., 277.

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid., 277-278; also see Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 100-130.

asserting, here and elsewhere,⁷⁸⁷ that Hegel's philosophy (as a form of *thinking*) does not necessitate that any object be determined by 'what it is not',⁷⁸⁸ but that it always is thought in its particular or 'determinate' location.⁷⁸⁹ Furthermore, the very act of thinking implies an objectivity that can never be reduced to the machinations of the ego, and therefore indicates a never-to-be-completed process of 'dispossession' by the thinking subject (a point we will return to later).

However, Williams's main focus in this essay is not primarily on which of these readings of Hegel is more correct. Instead the central protagonist in this text is Barth's theological *bête noire*, Erich Przywara. It is well-known that Barth had a profound distaste for the *analogia entis*,⁷⁹⁰ and was particularly critical of Przywara (even though he probably did not read his *magnum opus*⁷⁹¹). But Williams argues that Barth's rejection of the analogy of being leaves in place 'a stark dilemma as to the relation of God to creation', and could 'imply a picture of divine and finite action as simply mutually exclusive', 'a picture that entails a univocal understanding of finite and infinite being, two modes of action that are in competition for one logical space'.⁷⁹² In Williams's estimate, it is analogy – against a decadent Hegelianism and Barthianism – that 'moves us on from a dialectic that threatens to collapse into an ultimate self-identity'.⁷⁹³ It proposes 'a non-rivalrous difference', a difference that is *not* understood in 'binary terms'.⁷⁹⁴ Substantively, this is fleshed out in Przywara's proposal for 'creaturely metaphysics',⁷⁹⁵ or more specifically, a dual emphasis on a 'meta-noetics' and 'meta-ontics'.⁷⁹⁶ These respectively relate to 'the act of knowing' and 'the object of knowing', and constitute 'the irreducible duality' in our relation to the world.⁷⁹⁷

To use Heidegger's lexicon, 'meta-noetics' is related to *Dasein* ('being-there') while 'meta-ontics' is connected to *Sein* ('being-thus').⁷⁹⁸ The former speaks to 'the givenness of

⁷⁸⁷ Williams, 'Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity,' Logic and Spirit in Hegel,' and 'Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose,' in *Wrestling with Angels*, 25-34; 35-52; 53-76 resp.

⁷⁸⁸ 'Dialectic and Analogy,' 279.

⁷⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁷⁹⁰ For on Barth and the analogy of being, see John R. Betz, 'Translator's Introduction,' in Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 83-115.

⁷⁹¹ 'Dialectic and Analogy,' 292n. 50.

⁷⁹² *Ibid.*, 280.

⁷⁹³ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁷⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁷⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁷⁹⁶ See Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 119-124.

⁷⁹⁷ 'Dialectic and Analogy,' 285.

⁷⁹⁸ In *Analogia Entis*, Przywara's purpose is to reflect upon 'metaphysics "as such"', as found in the outworking and development of its 'formal principle' (Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 117). This comes into focus within his bipolarity between 'meta-ontics' and 'meta-noetics', the articulation of being-as-such and the historical phenomenology of consciousness, 'the act of knowledge and the act of being, understood as the object of the act of knowledge' (Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 120). For Przywara both sides of the polarity express themselves *within* human consciousness: on the one side 'The meta-noetic transcends itself in a forward intentionality, towards the meta-ontic', and on the other 'The meta-ontic

a certain process of becoming' while the latter says that there is 'no engagement with the historical givenness without recognising the continuity-in-change'.⁷⁹⁹ Within this framework, the *analogia entis* is aimed at bringing-out the "balance of tension" that occurs between these two polarizations, between 'what is being thought' and 'the temporal or process-related dimension in our knowing'.⁸⁰⁰ Such a 'balance' aims to counteract 'a 'pure' Idealist construction of the subject' and a 'crude realism' found in 'some neo-scholastic discussions'.⁸⁰¹ It does so in emphasizing the consistent interplay between *Sosein* and *Dasein*, whereby this 'unity-in-tension' moves thinking onto 'the analogical plane', since it is through the temporalised becoming of *Dasein* that we realize that *Sosein* is 'not identical with any moment of our perception'. Such a process is 'both 'critical' in the sense of being distanced from any one such moment of perception and united with the mysterious inner life of what is thought'.⁸⁰² Expressed theologically, this means that 'God is never exhaustively the other of creation. God is God, the identity of essence and existence, of *Da* and *So*', which is never the case for created beings, who remain alienated from their essence. For Przywara, '[God's] being is...outside any process of measurement or proportion', since God remains infinite and omnificent. Nonetheless, 'by the sheer gift simultaneously of existence and intelligible form to the finite, God establishes a world in which tension is inbuilt in our apprehension and thus 'analogical' thinking becomes of central importance'.⁸⁰³ Once more, we can see that the radical difference of God makes analogy possible, and precisely in a way that gives time-bounded existence its due regard.

This section concludes the previous three sections. Its aim was to deepen our earlier expansions on Williams's account of divine transcendence, attempting to show that his non-conflictive approach is deepened through his reflections on creativity, language and analogy.

moves backward in self-critique, reflexively, towards the meta-noetic' (*Analogia Entis*, 121). The duality that characterises the structure of a "creaturely metaphysics" is then a marker of the *Spannungs-Schwebe* within being-as-such, our existence *in fieri*, in 'becoming'. It is this finite and 'creaturely' dynamic which illuminates 'the suspended tension', within metaphysics, 'of the correlation (in its object) and upon the becoming proper to the back-and-forth relation (in its method)'. This interplay is grounded upon the Thomistic distinction between essence and existence, on an 'essence-in-and-beyond existence' [*Sosein in-über Dasein*] (*Analogia Entis*, 124). In Heideggerian language, 'meta-noetics' is directed towards knowledge-as-such, its primary object is the problem of 'existence' [*Dasein*], while 'meta-ontics' focuses on being-as-such, that is, on 'essence' [*Sosein*]. As Przywara says: 'truth is the region of the pure "thus" – *So*; history, the region of the "there" – *Da*' (*Analogia Entis*, 152).

⁷⁹⁹ 'Dialectic and Analogy,' 286.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid., 285.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid.

⁸⁰² Ibid., 287.

⁸⁰³ Ibid., 288. Williams's reflections here on analogy as having an intrinsic relation to the act of knowing and thinking connect to our earlier discussion of 'representation', which implied that there is no simple mirroring process implied in our acts of cognition. Using the language of Przywara, there is a 'tension' that exists in 'our capacity to *think* ('noetics') [that] is neither separable from nor identical with the judgement that it is in fact there ('ontics')'. This quotation can found in *The Edge of Words*, 20.

Williams's metaphysics dilated these trajectories by examining the material practices of poetics and language, displaying that the interstices between time and matter disclose a world that is inherently symbolic and meaningful. Such contentions transgress the dualisms between mind and matter, nature and super-nature, time and eternity, the vertical and the horizontal. Connecting this to our previous allusions to 'the sublime', this argument further substantiates the idea that the infinite can be mediated, however imperfectly, through creaturely ideation. We are not dealing here with a sheer negativity of the postmodern sublime, but a positive infinity of transcendent form.

But all of this raises a question: what about evil? How does this vision account for that? One can anticipate a response, given by thinkers like MacKinnon, namely that our argument here fails to take into account the tragic seriousness of our lot, the deeply troubling factor that evil continues to characterize our being-in-the-world. It cannot be erased or papered over. It must be engaged.

7.2. *Without Substance: Augustine and the Problem of Evil*

One of the critiques lodged by Hart and Milbank at Donald MacKinnon's plea for the tragic was its aversion to the *privatio boni*.⁸⁰⁴ We can recall his statement that the Platonic-Augustinian theory of *evil-as-privation*⁸⁰⁵ was 'the most profound spiritual error of transcendent metaphysics',⁸⁰⁶ and further 'that it has only to be stated clearly, and worked out in terms of concrete examples, to be shown to be totally inadequate as an analysis either of moral or of physical evil'.⁸⁰⁷ MacKinnon's concern appears to be that we fail to conceive evil if we consider it primarily as a 'lack', or as simply a deviation from an ideal. There is a real sense in which evil cannot be described as simple negation, that is, as an absence of the good. According to him, evil has a devastating positivism that resists this.

⁸⁰⁴ For a discussion of Augustine's theology of evil more generally, see G. R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982); Donald A. Cress, 'Augustine's Privation. Account of Evil: A Defence.' *Augustinian Studies* 20 (1989): 109–128; Johannes Brachtendorf, 'The Goodness of Creation and the Reality of Evil: Suffering as a Problem in Augustine's Theodicy'. *Augustinian Studies* 31.1 (2000): 79–92.

⁸⁰⁵ For the Neoplatonic tendencies that underlay Augustine's own account, see Harold Cherniss, 'The Sources of Evil According to Plato'. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 98.1 (1954): 23–30; John M. Rist, 'Plotinus on Matter and Evil'. *Phronesis* 6.2 (1961): 154–166; Jean-Marc Narbonne, 'Aristote et la mal'. *Documenti E Studi Sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale* 8 (1997): 87–103; Carlos Steel and Jan Opsomer, 'Evil Without a Cause: Proclus' Doctrine on the Origin of Evil and its Antecedents in Hellenistic Philosophy,' in Therese Fuhrer, Michael Erle, Karin Schlapbach (eds.), *Zur Rezeption der hellenistischen Philosophie in der Spätantike: Akten der 1. Tagung der Karl-und-Gertrud-Abel-Stiftung vom 22.-25. September 1997 in Trier*. Philosophie der Antike 9 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999), 229–260.

⁸⁰⁶ MacKinnon, 'Finality in Metaphysics, Ethics and Theology,' *Explorations in Theology*, 103

⁸⁰⁷ MacKinnon, 'Theology and Tragedy'. *Religious Studies* 2.2 (1967), 165.

Williams's major treatment of this is found in his essay 'Insubstantial Evil'.⁸⁰⁸ Expounding Augustine's 'grammar' of evil' remains the centralizing drift of this text: 'Talking about evil is not like talking about things, about what makes the constituents of the world the sorts of things they are'. Instead, 'it is talking about a *process*, about something that happens to the things that there are in the universe'. For Augustine, evil is 'not some kind of object'; on the contrary, 'we give the name of 'evil' to that process in which good is lost'. This process is connected to Augustine's account of creation: since God is timeless and therefore not an agent within time, he creates the material world as a contingent and interrelated totality, as one shaped by *forma* and *pondus* – form and balance – in a way that constitutes the metaphysical rationale for created goodness-as-such. Created beings are placed and shaped within a hierarchy of relation that determines their particularity. Without this *forma* and *pondus* there would be no way to register what change might actually mean, because in total formlessness and contingency, change and process are meaningless.⁸⁰⁹ It is in this context that *evil-as-privation* and *evil-as-process* finds its possibility. One of the golden threads running through this essay is Williams's argument that Augustine's account of evil is deeply connected to the doctrine of God and creation. Being and goodness are convertible realities; they are attributes of the same object. On Williams's perspective, these two things are so intimately related that if we reject the one, the other is put in question as well.⁸¹⁰

As Williams knows, this teaching has been questioned in recent times. In this text, his interlocutors are John Hick and Kathleen Sands, and not Donald MacKinnon explicitly. For his part, Williams thinks the non-substantiality of evil is not a negligible aspect of Christian metaphysics, since it concerns 'the question of what it is to speak of 'a' world at all, with all that this implies about the universe's relation to a maker'.⁸¹¹ But in talking about non-substantiality, what are we saying? Does evil really not 'exist'? Williams suggests that we cannot see this clearly unless we see that for Augustine there is no concept of 'sheer thereness', since 'to be at all is to have a particular place in the interlocking order of things', that 'to exist is necessarily to exemplify certain 'goods', to be, in a certain way, actively

⁸⁰⁸ Williams, 'Insubstantial Evil,' in George Lawless and Robert Dodaro (eds.), *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner* (London – New York: Routledge, 2000), 105-123.

⁸⁰⁹ Rowan Williams, 'Good for Nothing? Augustine on Creation'. *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994): 9-24 (pp. 17-18). Elsewhere, he writes that creation (for Augustine) is 'the setting in being of a living system destined to grow toward beauty and order, even if this beauty and order is not at any given moment fully apparent. Thus...the *temporal* character of the world is axiomatic: it is a world in motion, a set of processes in which potential is realized.' He goes on to say 'The story of creation as a whole...is ...a *story*, a process. Its goal is certainly something beyond time, though not exactly an eternal stasis: there is still the movement of love, the steady pressure towards God, the *pondus* drawing and holding things in God-centred harmony'. These quotations can be found in Rowan Williams, 'Creation,' in Allan Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 251-254 (pp.252-253).

⁸¹⁰ 'Insubstantial Evil,' 105.

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

exercising the ordered and interdependent life that belongs to the creatures of a good God'. Augustine's 'axiological' account of being does mean that existents can be ontologically "graded", that is, we can speak of differing levels of deficiency and actuality among distinct things. This should not be read as implying a 'crass mistake about the possibility of different degrees of "thereness"', but rather that 'the exercise of the goods that go with existing may be more or less constrained in its environment, more or less capable of modification', which indicates that there is an 'overall notion of interdependence' in which 'some realities are more dependent than others'.⁸¹² Addressing Hick, Williams disputes whether Augustine's *privatio boni* should be read as an 'aesthetic' theodicy in which evil does not exist, because, from the divine perspective of the whole, evil is cancelled by the balancing of good, much like the way dark blotches on a painting are absorbed into the product's completion.⁸¹³ Augustine's proposal is more radical than this: if there is no 'evil' from the divine perspective this is because evil is not a *thing* or *substance* that literally stands-out on its own terms.⁸¹⁴ Evil is a perversion; it is parasitic – a *parhypostasis*, to quote Proclus – and is preeminently manifest in the distortedness of desire.⁸¹⁵ Our very perspective on reality is so warped that even our acknowledgement of evil is tainted, so that we cannot speak dispassionately about it. Only God remains untainted.⁸¹⁶

An additional argument in favour of rejecting the 'aesthetic' reading of evil is that God – for Augustine and classical theology more generally – does *not* need anything outside of the sufficiency of God's own life. Therefore, any claim that God 'uses' us to achieve some aesthetic balance that exceeds the particular goods of created things is theologically questionable: since God requires no further fulfillment, creation can *only* be there for the good of creatures: 'The creature's perspective simply is defined by God's creative purpose...but that divine purpose is to maximize all possible fulfilment for the creature, since the good, the joy, the flourishing of the creature could never be in any way a threat to the divine bliss'.⁸¹⁷ Such a conclusion intimates that the co-ordination of divinity and humanity needs to be thoroughly "despatialised", as being non-conflictive, since we are not talking about different agencies vying for the same ontological territory.⁸¹⁸ A consequence of this is that evil can have no 'space' ontologically at all.⁸¹⁹ Evil is a question of contingency and not metaphysical necessity. It is a question of *time* and *process*, and the inherent limits that these impose on us.

⁸¹² Ibid.

⁸¹³ A critique of this style of 'aesthetic' theodicy can be found in Williams, 'Redeeming Sorrows: Marilyn McCord Adams and the Defeat of Evil,' in *Wrestling with Angels*, 255-274.

⁸¹⁴ 'Insubstantial Evil,' 107.

⁸¹⁵ Ibid., 109.

⁸¹⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁸¹⁷ Ibid., 108. See also Rowan Williams's 'On Being Creatures,' in *On Christian Theology*, 63-78.

⁸¹⁸ 'Insubstantial Evil,' 110). The references contained in this text to 'essences' over 'personal relationships' are a reference to John Hick's critiques of Augustine.

⁸¹⁹ Ibid., 109.

To use some remarks given elsewhere, ‘an authentically contingent world is one in which you cannot guarantee the compatibility of goods. That’s what it *is* to be created’.⁸²⁰ Evil is not a product of timeless essences engaged in eternal and bellicose struggles, as in Manichaeism, but are the historical production of finite actors.

Hick’s further criticisms however bring the discussion into an explicit relation with MacKinnon’s concerns: for Hick ‘there is, or should be, an important difference between ‘metaphysical’ and ‘empirical’ accounts of the reality of evil: whatever the accuracy of the metaphysical definition of evil as privation, it cannot be accurate to speak of evil *as experienced* in such terms...An evil will is not automatically one that tends towards disintegration and final extinction’, because ‘Evil activity has a power and ‘integrity’ of its own’. On a certain reading, ‘if evil is to be described as the absence of good’, one might see ‘pain’ as just an ‘absence of pleasure’ – which is of course a ‘grossly inadequate account’ of how evil ‘manifestly *impresses* itself upon the subject’.⁸²¹ Nonetheless, Williams thinks this is based on a fundamental misunderstanding: ‘the Augustinian argument’ is that ‘the ‘terrifying quality and power’⁸²² of evil’ stems from ‘those elements, in whatever reality we are talking about, that are most alive and active’. The particular malignity of evil is linked to ‘the kind of world this is, a world in which the active, joyful goodness of God is mirrored or shared by creatures’, and evil is terrifying precisely because the ‘underlay’ of our existence is ‘this intensity of action’, and this is why ‘the diversion or distortion of worldly reality is appalling’. For evil to ‘‘impress’’ itself upon us ‘it has to employ the vehicle of action and, in the human sphere, [this means] intelligence’. This intellectual aspect is connected to the question of volition, and so for Augustine, ‘The corrupted will is certainly not, *ipso facto*, a weak or powerless will, so long as it shows the typical excellences of will: liberty, energy, persistence or whatever’. The implication to be drawn is that sin or evil are not necessarily the result of an anemic will. Instead, ‘[what] makes...evil terrible are those excellences [and] nothing else’. Such means that ‘[what] is distinctively *evil* in the evil will is simply not capable of being spoken of or understood in terms of liberty, energy and so on’, or the lack thereof.⁸²³ There is a nexus of action and willing which brings about evil occurrences, but it is precisely *what* is distorted that makes its effects so awful.

Even though evil should be understood as privative – defined as a loss or perversion of the good – this should not imply that the consequences of evil can be categorized merely as a lack of some characteristic. What makes evil truly devastating is that it corrupts the agencies of

⁸²⁰ Rowan Williams, ‘Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision’. *New Blackfriars* 73.861 (1992), 319-326 (p. 322).

⁸²¹ ‘Insubstantial Evil,’ 110.

⁸²² This phrase is again taken from Hick.

⁸²³ ‘Insubstantial Evil,’ 110-111.

intellectual will, and that it is precisely this factor that makes evil heinous and destructive.⁸²⁴ So while evil is ontologically inexistent – it does not stand out as an independent ‘thing’ – the consequences it has on active agents is certainly not just privative: it has a “terrifying quality and power” that is irreducible to the sheer absence of particular qualities, because ‘what we experience and call evil is, indeed, not simply a void, [or] a lack’. One could say that ‘it is the effect of a lack, the displacement of true by untrue perception’, even though ‘its effects within a system of forces may be powerful’⁸²⁵ – which might sound ‘paradoxical’, but Williams thinks the alternatives are even more stark and dire. If evil has ‘a power of initiative, a capacity to set intelligible goals and to advance those goals in a lastingly coherent manner’, such would mean, firstly, that ‘evil impinges on a finite agent in the way that another finite agent would’, and secondly that there would be ‘nothing absurd in proposing, or having proposed to one, a set of objectives specified as evil in themselves and claiming to be proper objects for rational pursuit’. On this model, goodness and evil have ‘being’ univocally, which (as a result) places being-as-such into a sublime indeterminacy. Williams goes on to say that the first position is ‘Manichaeism’ pure and simple, since it proposes ‘evil as an invasive ‘other’, struggling with the moral responsibility of the finite person, so that the victory of evil is the victory of a subject, or substance, distinct from the finite person’.⁸²⁶ The second position suggests that ‘what is good for one subject is not necessarily good for any other’, or ‘that there is a plurality of intelligible goods, goals that may be pursued without absurdity by reasoning subjects’.⁸²⁷

This view stands in contrast to the traditional account of transcendent goodness given by Augustine, in which ‘[the] good of all persons is both unified and interdependent’, insofar as ‘I can not specify what is good for me without including what is good for you in the same calculation’. On Williams’s reading, ‘Augustine’s assumptions and arguments about the unreality of evil as an independent substance, cause or agency are bound up with a conviction about the location of evil in the malfunctioning of relations between subjects, not in the relation of this or that subject to some other *thing* called ‘evil’’. Therefore, Augustine would argue that ‘a possible grammar for talking of evil has to be recognised as subverting the very idea of intelligibility as something relating the individual’s mental/verbal life to a system or order transcending the individual frame’. Williams thereafter draws a conclusion from this: ‘if the Good is in some sense one, evil cannot be allowed a place of its own, outside the system

⁸²⁴ Ibid., 111.

⁸²⁵ Ibid., 113..

⁸²⁶ Williams calls this view ‘a mythological conception of something outside that agency displacing the person’s own responsibility’ (ibid., 112).

⁸²⁷ Ibid., 111-112.

of balancing and interweaving relations that actualise the Good for particular beings, and which, in a contingent world, are vulnerable to malfunction and distortion'.⁸²⁸

Hick's final criticism of evil-as-privation is linked to the Neoplatonic roots that inspire Augustine's metaphysics, which could be read as offering that the world develops in accordance with a principle of plenitude that has little connection to a divine choosing or willing. Different creatures, of relative sufficiency and deficiency, emerge from an impersonal process of 'emanation' that serves an ontological precept bifurcated from God's active providence and election. Williams contests whether Augustine can be read like this: diversity and the relative hierarchies of finite being are linked to a temporal process of generation and dependence, in which lack or deficiency are not merely there to serve some 'aesthetic' purpose for a detached observer, or impersonal principle; moreover, deficiency as such does not designate something evil per se.⁸²⁹ For Augustine, the universe does not grow as the result of an independent principle of harmony that has little connection to a personal God. Rather 'God 'chooses' to make a world that is both temporal and interdependent', and it is this that underpins 'the logic' of 'free determination', in which the 'variety' and 'the oscillation of circumstances' comes into being 'as agents act upon each other, never at any one point attaining perfect balance within the world's history'.⁸³⁰ For Augustine, diversity indicates that 'creation of *any* kind entails variety'.⁸³¹

Nonetheless, this Neoplatonic trajectory within Augustine is subjected to a fiercer attack, this time by Kathleen Sands. According to her, Augustine's theology of evil effectively denies 'the tragic' since on the 'rationalist' and 'dualist' model proposed 'there is no evil [which is] 'beyond comprehension or rehabilitation''.⁸³² As such, it fails to deal with the truly contingent nature of the reality, and divides the world up into good and bad, without taking into account the complexity and tragic interpenetration between virtue and vice. In creating divisions, Augustine lays the groundwork for an oppositional mentality – an 'us-versus-them' ethic – that (at its worst) legitimates the oppression of those who do not conform to *my* conception of goodness,⁸³³ as in Augustine's repression of the Donatists.⁸³⁴ It serves an 'anxiety to secure

⁸²⁸ Ibid., 112. Williams goes on to use an analogy to describe this: 'A discord on a musical instrument is not the result of the instrument being interfered with by an external agency *called* discord, it is a function of the workings of what is there, of what constitutes the instrument itself' (ibid., 112).

⁸²⁹ On p. 115, we read: 'Without sin, the hierarchy of the universe would have been a steady flow of interaction in which what is conventionally called the 'corruption', the disintegration, of elements is only a moment in their proper temporal unfolding and mutation, which is, in itself, good. It is only with the corruption of will and intelligence that change and passivity become problematic, infecting the whole of the world's order. Hence, Augustine's conviction that the Fall has *physical* consequences (human death)'.

⁸³⁰ Ibid., 115.

⁸³¹ Ibid.

⁸³² Ibid., 116.

⁸³³ Ibid., 117.

moral fixity' through 'the adversarial definition of evil in the present, and the negative account of it in the distant metaphysical horizon', 'an anxiety about the maintenance of the threatened dominant position of the male, reasonable will'. Evil-as-privation, for Sands, presupposes a metaphysics of "closure", one that 'constantly slip[s] into polarisations of 'the Good' and 'the not-Good'', 'polarisations that encourage the identification of actual agents here and now with the Good and the not-Good, and the projection of failure and lack on to certain classes and categories of existence (matter, woman, [etc.])'.⁸³⁵ It ultimately denies a tragic perspective which displays that even good actions can be entwined with negative outcomes, and that we cannot fully anticipate the historical shape of our decisions.

Here following the suggestions of Martha Nussbaum, Sands wants to propose an account of 'the good' that is 'various, mobile, vulnerable, rather than unified and stable',⁸³⁶ against an account of transcendent beatitude that denies historicity. Yet it is on precisely this point that Sands, according to Williams, misreads Augustine: on his view, Augustine affirms that 'there is no timeless and stable goodness in this world, 'no incarnation of evil'. Augustine's vision is that every 'creaturely good is realised in *time*,' and that 'the perfection of goodness exists not as something that issues from a process, but as the eternal standard and direction of creaturely good'.⁸³⁷ However, it is precisely this latter move that Sands wants to reject, namely, 'a transcendent measure of good'. She distinguishes her account of 'the good' as that which 'emerges as a possible, a 'viable', wholeness and balance in the life of moral communities'.⁸³⁸ This serves to counteract the ahistorical and dualistic metaphysics of evil which Sands traces to Augustine.

But Williams wonders whether this denial has the desired effect Sands wants from it. Because if this is so, then 'the Good is different for different created subjects, to the extent that what is good for one subject is necessarily and permanently at odds with what is good for another'. Or one could say that 'the Good genuinely differs from circumstance to circumstance, without any 'grammar' of continuity', 'that the Good of or for certain subjects might simply and finally fail or prove impossible of realisation'. If this is the logical outgrowth of her position, then there are some stark conclusions to consider. For as he says

⁸³⁴ Williams does contest this reading of the Donatist controversy: 'Part of Augustine's gravamen against both Pelagians and Donatists is to do with their identification of possible states within history as bearers of a goodness that is somehow complete or adequate. The Donatist absolutises the purity of the empirical church; the Pelagian affirms the possibility of keeping the commandments of God. Both take the church out of time, in their different ways. The church which continues to pray 'forgive us our trespasses', is a church whose purity and integrity are inseparable from continuing self-questioning and penitence' (ibid., 118).

⁸³⁵ Ibid.

⁸³⁶ Ibid., 116.

⁸³⁷ Ibid., 117-118.

⁸³⁸ Ibid., 118.

The first reading implies that there are genuine (truthfully conceived) creaturely goods that can be realised only at the expense of the genuine goods of others [which is] a view [that is] hard to reconcile with any properly emancipatory ethic, since it is the argument... of the slave-master. The second suggests that particular developments might render good what once was not, that torture or racial discrimination might be *made* good by historical changes. The third suggests that there are worldly subjects ‘predestined’ to final and irredeemable frustration. To appeal to the notion of a viable balance in a community’s life as a way of avoiding the Hobbesian consequences of these possible readings (the war of all against all, the *inevitable* non-convergence of creaturely good) will not really meet the case. It assumes that the reconciliation of partial and competing goods is itself a good to *be* pursued, without qualification, it seems. There is no argument to establish why this good should be exempt from the general prohibition against general goods. An absolutist assumption is being smuggled in under the guise of pragmatism.⁸³⁹

Williams, furthermore, contests the idea that Augustine’s theodicy is averse to the inescapability of the tragic: on the contrary, he might say that the ‘world is tragic, in the sense that our fallen perceptions of the world are so flawed that we are constantly, and inevitably (since the Fall), involved in mistaken and conflictual accounts of our true interests’. He even suggests as regards ‘the Good’ within ‘the fallen order’, that we do need ‘a measure of coercion if total incoherence and fragmentation are to be avoided’. He would not however deny that ‘*loss* is always bound up with creaturely virtue, [and] even sanctity’. For Augustine, because ‘there is no coercion that can ultimately overcome the perverse will, there are creaturely subjects whose good *is* eternally frustrated, [who are] lost souls’. These however are ‘contingent on a history, [and] not intrinsic to the nature of their good’. What Augustine would reject is ‘a definition of tragic conflict as a *necessary* feature of created order’, because it is precisely *that* which will provoke a ‘return to naked dualism’ in which ‘there is not one Good’ which we are able to progressively access. A consequence of this dualism would be that ‘there [could] be no convergence of goods’, and would result in an ‘irreconcilable cosmic struggle, with no ontological priority accorded to either side’.⁸⁴⁰

In contrast to Sands, Augustine proposes something that is simultaneously more radical and arguably more hopeful: for him, evil ‘neither has *a place* in the universe, [and] neither is a subject competing with others’, because ‘talking about evil is always talking about temporal processes’, which can be more deeply clarified as those ‘processes we learn to identify as loss or corruption’, those in which ‘we identify more clearly and truthfully...the whole

⁸³⁹ Ibid., 119.

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid.

interlocking pattern of the world's activity'. Augustine's reflections on time, and the self's implication in it, means that 'talking about God is always talking about the temporal processes of clarification, reconciliation, self-discovery in love, the processes that lead us beyond rivalry and self-protection'. For Williams (and Augustine), 'talking about God is the articulation of a self-knowledge that grasps the central dependence of the self, a knowledge of the self as lacking and searching and, thus, as presupposing a goal of desire that exceeds any specific state of affairs in this material world'.⁸⁴¹ Once more, he suggests that Augustine's vision provides resources for engaging horrendous evils, without collapsing this recognition into ontological despair or indeterminacy. Returning again to the central plea posed at the beginning, Williams argues that Augustine's reflections on evil and the transcendence of the Good cannot be considered apart from his wider acceptance of a specifically Christian metaphysic: 'If we do not share his understanding of evil as privation, [as] no-thing, [as] no-space', then we should ask the question as to whether we can in 'any way share his understanding of God as subsistent and overflowing fullness', as 'the non-competitive other whose freedom makes us free?'.⁸⁴²

What the above exposition has shown is that the question of evil is intrinsically related to one's vision of God. The Platonic-Augustinian assertion of evil-as-privation is based on the assumption of transcendent goodness, and that the world has a necessary relation to this truth. Evil on the other hand comes about as a result of a historical process that is contingent and non-necessary. This is primarily evidenced in the distortion of intelligent agencies that have a greater capacity for creating harm and destruction than non-mental ones (*'corruptio optimi pessima'*). This explains why evil, despite being ontologically privative in nature, has effects in the world that are not privative, and also expands why it can exhibit a horrific positivity. Such does not, however, necessitate metaphysical pessimism: since goodness holds a transcendent sway over reality, and is more 'substantially' connected to its material and historical development,⁸⁴³ this militates against any created part of reality as predestined to disaster – in the sense of being eternally fated, without any contingent involvement.⁸⁴⁴ Such a theology helps to explain why we can coherently claim that materiality contributes positively to our knowledge of God, since creation participates in God's goodness as its cause. But we can also see why evil is explicable in this context: evil has no 'space' in being, and therefore

⁸⁴¹ Ibid., 120.

⁸⁴² Ibid., 121.

⁸⁴³ Cf. Donald X. Burt, O.S.A, 'Courageous Optimism: Augustine on the Good of Creation'. *Augustinian Studies* 21 (1990): 55-66.

⁸⁴⁴ This admittedly might sit in tension with Augustine's own later reflections on double predestination, but one can see how later – in Eriugena, for example – this Augustinian trajectory of privation leads to a revisioning of the doctrine of predestination itself.

is not a ‘thing’ which ‘exists’ in the way everything else does.⁸⁴⁵ It comes as a result of a process, a privation within temporal being. Sinfulness means that our knowledge of God is always partially distorted by finite or perverted desires, but it does not mean that no truthful knowledge of God is possible. Because all of creation flows from goodness, and is providentially-directed to its respective goods, this means that our attempts to know the truth of being are never completely amorphous or eternally alienated. Our reflections on the world, on its repleteness of beauty and form, can give us truthful access to the transcendent, to that ordering reality that gives shape and unity to all things.

This background helps us as we move to the final chapter, where we place our discussion of tragedy within Williams’s expansions on the self. Apart from this wider context, the distention and fragmentation of the soul could imply an unrelenting ‘hemorrhaging’ of the subject, a never-ending rupturing that destroys any coherency of self, and which glorifies pain and woundedness as a desirable end as such.⁸⁴⁶ But as we will see, Williams’s reflections on selfhood are placed within an eschatological context that refuses pessimism, or any final dissolution of the subject. Instead, it is placed in a frame in which the self’s dispossessive and kenotic release of old identities are *not* opposed to the subject’s good. Our continual self-transcendence and estrangement involves us in risk and difficulty for sure, but it is by-no-means a hopeless progression. It certainly does not imply a sublime elevation of sacrificial abjection-without-return, or a nebulous infinite opposed to human intellection. For Christianity, transcendence is ‘shaped’, primarily by the character of God, who is the *summum bonum* of all creatures, and by the crucified and risen Christ who gives meaning to our rhythms of surrender and reception. Such patterning implies that self-sacrifice and kenosis is held open to the gift of a *novum*, and the unending plerosis of God’s vitality. It speaks of a ‘tragedy’ held within ‘grace’, of an excess that cannot be foreclosed by reward or merit. We cannot predict the circumstances of every decision, nor fully predict their ultimate outcomes. For the Christian, this means we live without certitude, but not without trust. Such emphasis means that we need an ‘eschatology [that] can cope with [tragedy] without diminishing its seriousness’.⁸⁴⁷ And it is these themes to which we now turn.

⁸⁴⁵ As Williams writes elsewhere, Augustine effectively ‘demythologizes’ the concept of evil, since for Augustine evil is ‘not a *thing* in the universe’ but rather a distortion of reality itself. See Rowan Williams, ‘Review: *Augustine on Evil* by G. R. Evans’, *Religious Studies*, 21.1 (1985): 95-96 (p. 96).

⁸⁴⁶ For a critique of postmodern approaches to the topic of pain, see Graham Ward, ‘Suffering and Incarnation,’ in Graham Ward (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 192-208.

⁸⁴⁷ ‘Christian Art and Cultural Pluralism,’ 42.

Chapter 8

Rowan Williams II

The Tragic within Grace, or On the Politics of Estrangement⁸⁴⁸

Here in the final chapter, we will try to disentangle Williams's reflections on the tragic. The argument will be made that Williams reads tragedy through the heuristic of *estrangement*, specifically as this is polarized on the trope of *learning*, that is, on the processes in which the self becomes distanced from self within time. Connected to this Augustinian doctrine is Williams's affirmation that our existence as finite agents implies a fragile subjectivity that is always labile to the risk of tragic irreversibility. But for Williams, such loss – and especially tragic deprivation – does not necessitate a closure of being, as if loss could be read as a kind of transcendental limitation (in the manner of a Kantian *a priori*). This is because deprivation always happens within the regime of history, and in the complex systems of meaning-making that form a part of human culture. Such implies that we cannot preclude that our knowledge of loss *as* loss can open us to other ways of being-in-the-world, a sense of avenues closing, and different paths widening, while being apprised that consolatory visions do not save us from difficulty. We cannot know beforehand whether this or that tragedy will occasion a disastrous climax, or whether it will destroy any possibility of integration, or something else. This is our tragic uncertainty.

But to assume that this necessitates, in every instance, an irremediable devastation is precisely to claim too much, because for Williams it is precisely that we *know* such loss, and are able to *speak* and *mourn* it, that allows such events to be included within sign-making, which is basic for our sense of 'world'. Furthermore, since all of this occurs within a process that is governed by God's loving care, no distention, however fragmented, can finally separate us from this direction. Because God is transcendent, and therefore not subjected to the chances of history, we can trust that there is a final order that gives unity to existence, without the implication of theodicy. Pertinent for Williams is the fact that language implicates us in a community of language-bearers: we cannot communicate without placing ourselves in a socio-political context. The self does not evolve in isolation, and so the reverberations of tragedy are felt by others, since its material consequences happen in a nexus of causation that includes the community within its expansion. This means that 'the tragic' cannot be reduced

⁸⁴⁸ The phrase 'the tragic within grace' is drawn from *Grace and Necessity* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 114.

to an individualist struggle of actors who are discharged with a private fate. Because tragedies influence communities, this means that its occurrence cannot be removed from the context of political mediation, and how such changes are re-worked by the societies it affects.

8.1. *On Learning*⁸⁴⁹

It is clear that Rowan Williams's theology has had a persistent focus on the exigencies and disciplines of *learning*, on how the practices of patient observance – or *attente*⁸⁵⁰ – can contribute to the moral growth of human personality.⁸⁵¹ As a philosophical theologian he is concerned to account for how we, as finite beings, are educated and formed in our language-usage,⁸⁵² that is, with how we are to negotiate the claims of 'otherness', and that communality given within the dynamics of speech. He is focused particularly here on how this process becomes a necessary element in our discovery and dilation of truth, since there can be no privatized or punctiliar 'meaning' discerned by lone agents. There is no sublimely-rendered 'otherness' beyond the reaches of intelligent communication, since how could we even cognize 'what-is-other' without the adjudications of language itself? But even more profoundly, and from a metaphysical vantage, this certainly cannot be the case since for Williams *all* of reality is teleologically-directed towards intellection; the world is always-already saturated with an excess of significance⁸⁵³ that participates, and is consummated in, the Father's creative and loving contemplation of the world itself within the Logos and the Spirit.⁸⁵⁴ 'Difference' and 'difficulty', within this theological (and Hegelian) model, are not then amorphous generalities, devoid of description or human 'recognition', but are precisely *thinkable* entities since they are continually discovered through the dialectic of linguistic and

⁸⁴⁹ This section is expanded and heavily edited version of another essay of mine. For this, see Khegan Delport, 'Of Danger and Difficulty: Rowan Williams and 'the Tragic Imagination'. *The Heythrop Journal* (Forthcoming).

⁸⁵⁰ The reference here is to Simone Weil, who has had a significant influence on Williams's thinking from early on. This can be seen in his essay 'Simone Weil and the Necessary Non-Existence of God,' in *Wrestling with Angels*, 203-227.

⁸⁵¹ Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (London – New York: T & T Clark, 2000), 13-63. Also see Mike Higon, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), 89-111 and Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London and New York: T& T Clark, 2012), 51-58 for a summary of this aspect of his thinking.

⁸⁵² Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation,' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 131: 'Theology...is perennially liable to be seduced by the prospect of bypassing how it *learns* its own language'.

⁸⁵³ See our previous discussion of *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁸⁵⁴ Williams, 'What does Love Know? St. Thomas on the Trinity'. *New Blackfriars* 82.964 (2001): 260-272.

interpersonal mediation.⁸⁵⁵ These realities are thinkable just because they can be brought into speech and articulated amongst fellow language-bearers. But such a process implies that meaning can never be an individual project undertaken, but is irreducibly relational, entrenched within the interactions and communication of human agents. We are always-already placed within a context that exceeds our grasp, which implies that there can be no ‘private’ articulations of ‘the self’ apart from the negotiations of language,⁸⁵⁶ and that there is always a larger context in which our attempts at communication are to be placed, so that the significance thereof continually awaits a further social and metaphysical accretion. There is a perennial openness towards learning, and there is always a potentially deeper perspective from which something can be engaged (‘Humility is endless’ as T.S. Eliot once said⁸⁵⁷.)

This means that the subject’s engagement with ‘difficulty’ should not be seen as an ‘indulgent’ exercise in problems for their own sake, as if ‘one’s moral being [were] somehow heightened by the mere fact of having become problematic’⁸⁵⁸ (recalling here again Cornelius Ernst apropos Donald MacKinnon). Rather, for Williams ‘difficulty’ is always tied to a moral framework of ‘dispossession’, which in his usage implies a refusal to halt ‘the process of exchange’⁸⁵⁹ that constitutes us in our humanness. Any attempt to extricate ourselves from this continuing conversation would imply a mythological picture in which we could establish for ourselves a *locus standi* apart from the unfolding drama of history, claiming thereby for ourselves a ‘divine’ perspective above the fray of temporal strictures.⁸⁶⁰ A conscious and willing avoidance of ‘difficulty’ – here repeating Cora Diamond once more – would connote a ‘deflection’, a refusal to accept our finite ‘bodies’.⁸⁶¹ It would imply a refusal to appreciate ‘the apparent resistance by reality to one’s ordinary modes of life, including one’s ordinary modes of thinking’, and could be read as a failure to acknowledge ‘the difficulty’ of being ‘shouldered out of how one thinks, or how one is supposed to think’.⁸⁶² These words by Diamond summarize justly Williams’s thoughts (as they did MacKinnon’s), showing how for him the acknowledgement of ‘difficulty’ or ‘actuality’ has a deep moral and political register within his thinking, and cannot be reduced to a love of the ‘problematic’ for its own sake.

⁸⁵⁵ Williams, ‘Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity,’ ‘Logic and Spirit in Hegel,’ and ‘Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose,’ in *Wrestling with Angels*, 25-34; 35-52; 53-76 resp. Also cf. *The Edge of Words*, 186-197.

⁸⁵⁶ Williams, ‘The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer,’ in *Wrestling with Angels*, 186-202.

⁸⁵⁷ T.S. Eliot, ‘East Coker II,’ in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 187.

⁸⁵⁸ Cornelius Ernst, ‘Ethics and the Play of Intelligence’ *New Blackfriars* 39.460-461 (1958), 326.

⁸⁵⁹ ‘Politics and Metaphysics,’ 53.

⁸⁶⁰ Cf. Williams, ‘Theological Integrity,’ in *On Christian Theology*, 6: ‘...religious and theological integrity is possible as and when discourse about God declines the attempt to take God’s point of view (i.e. a ‘total perspective’).’

⁸⁶¹ Cora Diamond, ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,’ in Stanley Cavell et al, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 59.

⁸⁶² *Ibid.*, 58.

Instead, his concern with ‘difficulty’ is tied to a vision of spiritual transformation that refuses to understand such moral growth as a reductive or privatized ‘technology’,⁸⁶³ as if such development was exclusively about self-expression, self-management, or any kind of egoism for that matter. Spiritual growth cannot be a solitary accomplishment, apart from a ‘world’ of interaction; and so the denial of ‘difficulty’ and limited perception, within the sphere of interpersonal engagement and spirituality, can only imply a furtive ‘ideological’ bid towards a conclusive power, a ‘totalized’ knowledge that claims metaphysical comprehensiveness for febrile parochialisms.⁸⁶⁴ This aspect of moral expansion is essential for his understanding of the self, and its place within the order of the world, and requires that we tease out this theme a bit further, since it remains important for the discussion that is to follow.

8.2. *The Self in Fragments: On Tragi-Comic Augustinianism*⁸⁶⁵

Williams’s dilations on ‘the self’ place an emphasis on ‘the inescapable significance of time as a correlate of bodiliness’, as these form ‘a return to ‘surfaces’ or appearances’. In this mood, we become ‘conscious of the irreducible elements of history and contingency’ that are part of ‘the formation of knowledge and religious faith’.⁸⁶⁶ Personhood cannot be prized apart from materiality and relational connectedness, especially as this physicality contributes to meaning. There is no *matter* without *mattering*, no objectivity apart from intellection: ‘the body is never helpfully described as an object like other material objects’, because by ‘that curious material transaction called language, we continue to recognize that the oddity of this material reality that is *my* body is an oddity shared by other materially recognizable bodies.’⁸⁶⁷ Williams’s phenomenology is resourced by Merleau-Ponty and Aquinas: ‘the body is the soul...the body does not become intelligent, purposeful, endowed with feeling and so on because something is added to it. This is what the body is – a *meaning* portion of matter’.⁸⁶⁸ The body is inseparable from physical communication; it is temporal and therefore

⁸⁶³ Cf. Michel Foucault ‘Technologies of the Self,’ in Luther H. Martin, Huck Goodman, Patrick H. Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.

⁸⁶⁴ Cf. Williams’s remarks in ‘Theological Integrity’.

⁸⁶⁵ In what follows, I have been greatly helped by Ryan Green’s *Kenosis and Ascent: The Trajectory of the Self in the Writings of John Milbank and Rowan Williams* (Ph.D., Charles Sturt University, 2017). I have addressed this topic elsewhere in Khegan Delpont, ‘*Interior intimo meo: Rowan Williams on the Self*’. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4.2 (2018): 471-504. That essay did not give significant space to Williams’s Hegelianism. My presentation here aims to supplement that account somewhat.

⁸⁶⁶ Williams, ‘Author’s Introduction’ in *Wrestling with Angels*, xvi.

⁸⁶⁷ Williams, ‘On Being a Human Body’. *Sewanee Theological Review* 42.4 (1998): 403-413 (p. 406).

⁸⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 406. For more on this account of the soul, see Williams, *Lost Icons*, 171-228. Also see Williams, ‘Macrina’s Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion,’ in Lionel R. Wickham and Catherine P. Bammel (eds.) *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to Christopher Stead* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1993), 227-246 for a discussion on the relation between reason, animality, the body as well as the passions.

finite: ‘what we are *are* our limits, that we are here not there, now not then, took this decision, not that, to bring us here and now’.⁸⁶⁹ Our embeddedness means that we are limited, that we are particular entities who are opened to ‘the being-at-hand of love’⁸⁷⁰ – the love of other beings and the infinite love of the Creator. Christianity is *incarnational* and not dualistic because ‘the self God deals with is not some mysterious inner core, but my body’, and it is here ‘where we learn and where we speak and share’. He goes as far as to say that if ‘we cannot love our mortal vulnerability, our own frail flesh, we shall love nothing and nobody’.⁸⁷¹ This is because ‘we encounter God truly only when we accept our mortal fragility for what it is, do not seek to escape it, but put our trust in a God who speaks and relates to us through flesh’.⁸⁷²

As Christians, we should not aspire to be untrammelled from the embodied life. On the contrary, ‘fleshly life is not a burden to be borne, nor a prison to be escaped from, but a task to be perfected in grace.’⁸⁷³ It is precisely within embodied life and temporal fragility where holiness is received and discovered, where we come to ‘the recognition of the holy within the contingent order’, even though this progression is ‘always undercut by...disruptive [and] discontinuous elements’, by ‘exile and alienation, loss and death.’⁸⁷⁴ Such means that ‘to live in the material and temporal world is to be vulnerable to the impact of unstable circumstances’. For the Christian, an existence within time’s unfolding compass is about ‘how we deal with those circumstances that will bring to light who and what we actually are’. Nevertheless, our response to the bringing-to-light of sin and self-knowledge should not imply a repression or an escape from bodiliness, but a therapy of desire that includes our materiality: ‘what Christ delivers us from is not bodily circumstance, contingency, or instability...but from the habits of mind and heart that make of this environment only a theatre for our private obsessions to be staged and our lust for control to be exercised’.⁸⁷⁵

This emphasis on the rapacious drive towards mastery, or *libido dominandi*, transitions us to Williams’s writings on Augustine. A discussion of this figure is apt since he is considered by some as being the foundational theorist of Western subjectivity, a proto-Cartesian thinker

⁸⁶⁹ Williams, ‘The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer,’ in *Wrestling with Angels*, 186-202 (p. 186).

⁸⁷⁰ ‘On Being a Human Body,’ 408.

⁸⁷¹ Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1995), 35.

⁸⁷² Williams, ‘Good for Nothing? Augustine on Creation’ *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994), 18.

⁸⁷³ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (rev. ed., London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 61.

⁸⁷⁴ Williams, ‘Troubled Breasts: The Holy Body in Hagiography,’ in Jan Willem Drijvers and John W. Watt (eds.), *Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium, and the Christian Orient* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 63-78 (p. 77).

⁸⁷⁵ ‘Tempted as we are’: Christology and the Analysis of the Passions,’ in J. Baun, A. Cameron, M. Edward and M. Vincent (eds.), *Studia Patristica XLIV* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 391-404 (pp. 400-401).

who anticipates the self-reflexivity of modernity.⁸⁷⁶ Williams takes a serious departure from this perspective: in his estimate, Augustine resists the suasions to ground self-knowledge within the ego. He does so by placing the soul within an *epektasis* and *ekstasis* of desire, that is, in an active movement of the soul towards God in its continuing displacement and de-centering. For him, the self is formed through a ‘radical incompleteness and other-directedness’.⁸⁷⁷ In Williams’s reading, Augustine’s understanding of the soul is ‘relational’, being analogous to ‘the self-relatedness of the divine essence’.⁸⁷⁸ Rather than being ‘proto-Cartesian or proto-Kantian’,⁸⁷⁹ Augustine aims ‘to ‘demythologise’ the solitary ego by establishing the life of the mind firmly in relation to God’, a God understood as ‘self-gift, as movement to otherness and distance in self-imparting love’.⁸⁸⁰ Therefore ‘for the mind to acquire *sapientia* is for the mind to see itself sustained and embraced by this self-communicating action of God’.⁸⁸¹

For Augustine, our identity is ‘ultimately in the hand of God’, in the divine *memoria*, and therefore not self-constituting. This differentiates Augustine from the Platonic account of *anamnesis* – or so Williams thinks – since Augustine is not talking about the soul as ‘a non-temporal thing’; the self is in ‘some sense *made*, by the infinitely painstaking attention to the contingent strangeness of remembered experience in conscious reference to God’.⁸⁸² The soul grows within time: ‘The self *is*...what the past is doing now, it is the process in which a particular set of ‘given’ events and processes and options [crystalize] now in a new set of particular options, responses and determinations, providing a resource of given past-ness out of which the next decision and action can flow’.⁸⁸³ Augustine’s emphasis on *memoria* ‘affirms that the present situation has a context; it, like the self, is part of a continuity, it is ‘made’ and so it is not immutable’.⁸⁸⁴ This sense of contingency and constructedness is linked to the imagery of the soul as a wandering pilgrim, existing without a final home in time. Its

⁸⁷⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 127-142.

⁸⁷⁷ ‘The Paradoxes of Self-knowledge in *De trinitate*,’ in Joseph T. Lienhard, Earl C. Muller and Roland J. Teske (eds.), *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum. Collectanea Augustiniana* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 121-134 (p. 127).

⁸⁷⁸ Rowan Williams, ‘Sapientia and the Trinity: Reflections on the *De Trinitate*,’ in Bernard Bruning, Mathijs Lamberigts, and J. van Houtem (eds.), *Collectanea Augustiniana: Mélanges T. J. Van Bavel*, vol. 1 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), 317-332 (p. 317).

⁸⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁸⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 331. Williams considers the trinity itself to involve a movement of desirous relation within the immanent relations of triune being, which is the ontological foundation of our own created longing towards God and the other-directed desire. For this, see Rowan Williams, ‘The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure,’ Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds.), *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115-135.

⁸⁸¹ ‘Sapientia and the Trinity,’ 320.

⁸⁸² Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 71.

⁸⁸³ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), 23.

⁸⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

movement is continual, everlastingly drawn towards its final cause. In fact, ‘we are not able to know or love ourselves ‘accurately’ unless we know and love ourselves as known and loved by God’.⁸⁸⁵ However, the counterpart to this ascent is that the soul continues to be wounded by divinity, fragmented within its *distentio*, in its inability to reach an achieved unity within time. The Pauline concept of *kenosis* and its cruciform pattern requires that we leave behind identities which hinder us from inhabiting Christ’s identity. Precisely because we are not God, and therefore limited, our personal integrity cannot be achieved apart from *dispossession*, an acknowledgement that our identity is ungraspable (cf. Phil. 2.1-11). Of course it must be added that the unhanding of self is always contextualized by resurrection, by the plenitude of the divine *memoria*. Augustine suggests that despite the fragmentary nature of the soul, there is still the hope that God ‘can make a story, a continuous reality, out of the chaos of unhappiness, ‘homeless’ wandering, hurt and sin’.⁸⁸⁶ His account of interiority is that ‘we are to know and love ourselves as questing, as seeking to love with something of God’s freedom (in the sense of a love not glued to any object of satisfaction)’.⁸⁸⁷

In an essay entitled ‘Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s *De Doctrina*,’ Williams explicates Augustine’s distinction between *frui* and *uti* (‘enjoyment’ and ‘use’) as well as *res* and *signum* (‘thing’ and ‘sign’).⁸⁸⁸ For Augustine, we can approach any particular *res* in two distinct ways: either we treat it as an end in itself, or as a sign towards something else. Since God is supremely *res* – the one who forms the context in which all things are to be meaningfully positioned – Augustine argues that created reality should be read as *signum*, since it does not have its existence within itself. Therefore ‘no worldly *res* is securely settled as a fixed object ‘meaning’ itself, or tied in a fixed designation’. Such implies that ‘no worldly state of affairs can be allowed to terminate human desire...all that is present to us in and as language is potentially *signum* in respect of the unrepresentable God’.⁸⁸⁹ Hereby the self is moved by *dilectio* towards God, who as the *telos* of human desire is the only one who can be enjoyed for his own sake, as the *res* itself. But since this is the case, and it is only within God’s life that *res* and *signum* – or essence and existence – coincide, it follows that created reality can only be ‘used’ towards ‘enjoyment’, since it is only God who exists *per se*. Such language is easily open to misinterpretation, since as post-Kantians we are suspicious of categorizing people as ‘means’ rather than ‘ends’.

But in Williams’s opinion, Augustine’s language of *uti* avoids such a conclusion, since he orientates the final end towards God. Precisely because God is the end of desiring, human

⁸⁸⁵ ‘Sapientia and the Trinity,’ 319-320.

⁸⁸⁶ *The Wound of Knowledge*, 72.

⁸⁸⁷ Williams, ‘The Paradoxes of Self-knowledge in *De trinitate*,’ 131.

⁸⁸⁸ Rowan Williams, ‘Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s *De Doctrina*’. *Journal of Literature & Theology* 3.2 (1989): 138-150.

⁸⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

beings should not be treated as an ‘end’ but rather as a *signum* towards our ultimate source: ‘the language of *uti* is designed to warn against an attitude towards any finite person or object that terminates their meaning in their capacity to satisfy my desire, that treats them as the end of desire, conceiving my meaning in terms of them and theirs in terms of me’.⁸⁹⁰ Augustine’s deployment of the *uti-frui* distinction does not justify an instrumentalisation of human persons for the sake of some transcendent goal – completion or self-satisfaction – at the expense of another’s given dignity. One could actually suggest that it is precisely the opposite: it is to affirm that *no human object* can be reduced to a mere tool precisely because it remains a *signum* – an *imago dei*. Since desire is infinite, no worldly object can bring it to completion: only God can do that. Therefore, to speculatively project any person as the ‘end’ of my desire would be self-denial. It would idolatrously claim that a finite entity could act as ‘God’ for me. This would be the supreme instance of the *libido dominandi*, in which ‘the subject distorts its self-perception into fixity’, into a form of ontological closure whereby selfhood is reduced to ‘the meeting of needs in the determinate form in which they are mediated to [me] in the perception of the Other’.⁸⁹¹ If we become stuck within this restriction, according to Williams, then we hinder spiritual growth, thinking that our good finds completion within time.

Augustine’s account of desiring also is linked to his idea that the self is ‘bound up with the desire for the Good’ and ‘for *iustitia*’; such means that ‘the self in construction is a self whose good is understood in terms of a universally shareable good’, which is ‘not known adequately without a grasp of the inseparability of its good from the good of all.’ Williams even suggests that if ‘there is a ‘secret’ to be uncovered by the search for self-knowledge, it is perhaps this unconscious involvement in desire for the common good’, and that ‘if there is a ‘politics’ of self-knowledge in Augustine, it lies in the dissolution of any fantasy that the good can be definitively possessed in history by any individual or any determinate group in isolation’.⁸⁹² But this refusal implies that we accept a dispossessive negotiation, in which

I must explain myself if I am to attain what I want, and as I try to bring to speech what is of significance to me in such a way as to make it accessible to another, I discover that I am far from sure what it is that I can say. I become difficult to myself, aware of the gap between presentation and whatever else it is that is active in acting.⁸⁹³

⁸⁹⁰ Ibid., 140.

⁸⁹¹ Rowan Williams, “‘Know Thyself’: What Kind of an Injunction?” in Michael McGhee (ed.), *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 211-227 (pp. 223-224).

⁸⁹² “Know Thyself,” 222.

⁸⁹³ Williams, *Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading of New Testament Ethics*, in *On Christian Theology*, 239-264 (p. 240).

Such means that the ‘sense of the ‘hiddenness’ of another self is something I develop in the ordinary difficulty of conversation and negotiation’: ‘The proper logic of this recognition [is] that my self-knowledge emerges from converse and exchange’. This ‘enjoins consistent scepticism about claims to have arrived at a final transparency to myself’, and means that ‘I do not cease to be *vulnerable* to other accounts of myself, to the pressure to revise what I say of myself’.⁸⁹⁴ Vulnerability is *kenosis*, an imitation of the *infirmia divinitas*, of the incarnation, ‘the weak God lying at our feet’, that pattern of ‘Christ incarnate and crucified’ which betokens an ‘emptiness of meaning and power that makes Christ supremely *signum*’.⁸⁹⁵ For Williams, ‘The Word incarnate and crucified’ – in a quasi-Derridean fashion⁸⁹⁶ – ‘represents the absence and deferral that is basic to *signum* as such, and represents also, crucially, the fact that absence and deferral are the means whereby God engages our desire so that it is freed from its own pull towards finishing, towards presence and possession’.⁸⁹⁷ So rather than affirming a desire to control, Augustine’s theology implies that we surrender identities which place the ego at its magnetic centre, and come to find our deepest interiority in the exteriority of kenotic self-giving.

The topics of kenosis and dispossession lead to other influences on Williams’s conception of the self, namely Hegel and Gillian Rose. Against a trend of critical scholarship, Williams wants to recover Hegel as a philosopher who places primacy on the activity of *thinking*, that is, how is it possible to think anything in particular. In ‘Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity’,⁸⁹⁸ he seeks to place Hegel in opposition to the postmodern emphasis on sheer negativity or *différance* in which ‘the sacred’ is equated with ‘absence’ and ‘rupture’. Hegel is often paraded, within critical theory, as the prime example of that ‘totalizing dialectic’ that reduces ‘the other’ to ‘my other’, that is, to ‘a resolvable, confrontable difference’.⁸⁹⁹ Williams however contests this reading: Hegel’s system is ‘not a story of *return* to the same’. In fact, his philosophy is an attempt ‘to challenge the all-sufficiency of the polarity of simple identity and simple difference’. This is because what is ‘thinkable is so precisely because thinking is not content with the abstraction of mutual exclusiveness, but struggles to conceive a structured wholeness nuanced enough to contain what appeared to be contradictories’.⁹⁰⁰ For Hegel, theological language is ‘bound up with the making of sense’, with ‘the labour of making’ and ‘the labour of finding’. Such distinguishes Hegel’s thinking from naïve

⁸⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁸⁹⁵ ‘Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s *De Doctrina*,’ 144.

⁸⁹⁶ Cf. Jeffrey McCurry, ‘Towards a Poetics of Theological Creativity: Rowan Williams Reads Augustine *De Doctrina* after Derrida’, *Modern Theology* 23.3 (2007): 415-433.

⁸⁹⁷ ‘Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s *De Doctrina*,’ 148.

⁸⁹⁸ ‘Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity,’ in *Wrestling with Angels*, 25-34.

⁸⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

representationalism or any ‘voluntarist play’.⁹⁰¹ The kind of ‘negativity’ here predicated does not emphasize the transcendent as an unspeakable rupture; rather, it requires ‘a moral and spiritual dispossession and recreation’.⁹⁰² The dangers of a ‘negativity’ that favours some kind of ‘abstraction’⁹⁰³ from “exchange”⁹⁰⁴ is that it leads to a ‘depoliticized – or even anti-political – aesthetic’ in which ‘there is a subtle suggestion that social and linguistic order (as opposed to this or that particular and questionable order) is what we need to be delivered from’.⁹⁰⁵

In ‘Logic and Spirit in Hegel’,⁹⁰⁶ Williams deepens his reading by saying that for him our attempts at thought cannot be ‘*in the abstract*’ since they are always placed within the ‘context’ of their arrival, ‘their concrete, time-taking actuality’.⁹⁰⁷ There is no thinking of any particularity without “mediation”, which he defines as that which is ‘realised and maintained by something other than itself alone’. For Hegel, ‘no otherness is unthinkable’, and any claim of ‘absolute otherness is fundamentally confused’, since any ‘negation’ is concerned with what ‘*could* be thought’.⁹⁰⁸ But because this context is never circumscribable, this means that ‘we think *within*...an infinite relatedness, a comprehensive intelligibility’, which we call God.⁹⁰⁹ Much like Augustine, Williams’s Hegel understands that there is no ‘timeless subjectivity’. Consciousness, since it is mediated, is tied to ‘the recognition of the self in the other’, in what is *different* to the ego.⁹¹⁰ ‘Concrete freedom is the development of selfhood in the otherness of what is given’,⁹¹¹ which again implies a Christological pattern of ‘dispossession’. Here, we ‘lose the pretensions of the individual consciousness, the mind at home in and with itself over [against] a passive externality’.⁹¹² Hegel’s account of the development of ‘Spirit’ is thus “ecstatic” and “kenotic”, a discovery of ‘the self’s being-in-the-other’, which is a contemporisation of the Christian ‘form of love’.⁹¹³

The explicit influence of Gillian Rose is present in two texts. In the former, Williams attempts to outline a metaphysical register that takes ‘history’ seriously, that is, one that does not halt that ‘process of exchange’ as this discloses “reality” or ‘actuality’ as *difficult* for us.⁹¹⁴ Our speech takes place within a continuum, a sense of having recognized that collective meaning is not limited to my own selfhood. Since we are sign-making creatures, we are

⁹⁰¹ Ibid., 30.

⁹⁰² Ibid., 31.

⁹⁰³ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁹⁰⁶ ‘Logic and Spirit in Hegel,’ in *Wrestling with Angels*, 35-50.

⁹⁰⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁹⁰⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁹¹⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁹¹¹ Ibid., 43-44.

⁹¹² Ibid., 45.

⁹¹³ Ibid., 48.

⁹¹⁴ ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics,’ 53.

concerned with that which ‘sustains intelligibility in the exchanges and negotiations that constitute our actuality’, and not therefore with inexplicable and rhapsodic articulations of the ego. I can only work and communicate what I want to say within ‘a distinct accumulation of past negotiation’ in which all ‘perspectives’ are made ‘accessible’,⁹¹⁵ that is, in a meaningful ‘action’ that can be ‘followed’ by others.⁹¹⁶ Without this, we would not be able to chart ‘how error arises’,⁹¹⁷ or where we have failed in our bids for truth, since without an intelligible basis for political arguments, we cannot recognize our *mistakes*. Rose suggests that every claim for meaning is socially implicated, and is not created by *me* alone: ‘the taking of a *position*’ is something distinct, and yet such positioning cannot be abstracted from ‘the entirety of the path’ which is yet to be undertaken, and therefore should not be foreclosed.⁹¹⁸

This emphasis on staking a position does not imply a hopelessly antagonistic model, because it is through our discovery of *the-self-in-the-other* – albeit within ‘scarcity’ – that we come to an awareness of shareable goods, an environment of ‘potential abundance’,⁹¹⁹ ‘a common life’ that exceeds exclusionary competition.⁹²⁰ On the speculative level, the wager on the shareability of goods – that my goods are bound up with yours, that our interests are connected – suggests a metaphysical or ‘intelligible structure’ that is not the product of ‘arbitrary willed options’.⁹²¹ For Williams, metaphysics is primarily about the deepening of intellection, and not the imposition of will.⁹²² Here we encounter previous themes touched on: to speak of ‘the good’ requires that we think beyond a merely localized ‘good’, a ‘good’ that is not simply the product of contingency. To achieve understanding, one moves from specific instances of goodness towards what is the Good-in-itself, since if there was no transcendent Good, then we would be stuck in a conflictive arrangement in which rival ‘goods’ would always be attempting to outbid each other without rapprochement.

From a metaphysical perspective, the discovery of a non-conflictive account of the good implies a universalizing abstraction from the particular, whose ethical correlate is a ‘dispossession’ and ‘collaboration’, the awareness that *my* good exceeds ‘any individual decision or project’.⁹²³ Our intellection of the good is achieved in an engagement with particular standpoints as they continue to unfold within time, but this does not mean that the Good-as-such is produced through these contingencies. The Good can be represented in negotiation, but cannot be reduced to any individual attempt of representation. On this

⁹¹⁵ Ibid., 54.

⁹¹⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁹¹⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁹¹⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁹¹⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁹²⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁹²¹ Ibid., 57.

⁹²² Ibid., 73.

⁹²³ Ibid., 59.

reading, Hegel should be distinguished from ‘the pathos of perpetual negation’⁹²⁴ exemplified in anti-representational sublimities, since there is no preemption or speculative closure of thought’s horizons. Of course, there is a surplus or even ‘loss’ in the cultural bids for meaning – since reconciliation does not dissolve *otherness* – but this does imply that no ‘labour of analogy’ between differing ‘processes of production’ is possible.⁹²⁵ Conflicting paradigms may be agonistic, and yet there is a hope that through a commitment to negotiation, we can charter avenues of commonality.

Williams’s more recent essay on Rose attempts to provide a balance to the austere vision given in his previous readings. In this text, he emphasizes that Hegel’s dialectic can be described in comedic rather than ‘tragic’ terms.⁹²⁶ In his definition, ‘Comedy arises from the gap between what we think we are and what in fact we are’, in which ‘the more developed the apparent mastery of the environment by the subject, the more developed are the comic possibilities’. More expansively, he says that ‘to be sure of myself as always mistaking, always misrecognizing’ opens us to the possibility of a ‘comic resolution’, one that ‘allows me to move decisively away from fear and bewilderment in the face of the other’. It is ‘only recognition that liberates us, the recognition of the other as, like me, engaged, whether knowingly or not, in “comic” self-discovery’.⁹²⁷ Such a recognition of ‘the gap between what we hope for and what we achieve’ is the basis for a laughter that is ‘holy’, and not cynical or despairing.⁹²⁸ The ‘recognition’ of myself within the other is, furthermore, intrinsically connected to the discovery of *reason*, a sense of coherency, within ‘the risky activity of assuming recognizability’.⁹²⁹

This means that ‘reason’, according to Rose, ‘has to act with a confidence not in its final justification but in the possibility of truthfulness’, hence its riskiness.⁹³⁰ Without this assumption, so Williams argues, we are back to the violence of exclusionary confrontation. Of course, a complete avoidance of ‘violence’ is not possible, since engagement occasionally requires coercion in order to move forward. But it is also critical to emphasize that such ‘violence’ should not be equated with evil, or assumed to be always necessary.⁹³¹ It is rather a sign of the tragic limitation that characterizes created finitude. The important distinction to be made here is that even though conflict may be unavoidable in some contexts, this does not mean it always has to be like this. If conflict arises, then ‘reason’ unpacks *how* this conflict

⁹²⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁹²⁵ Ibid., 59.

⁹²⁶ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), 63-76.

⁹²⁷ “The Sadness of the King,” 22

⁹²⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁹²⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁹³⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁹³¹ This point has been emphasized well by Brett Gray in *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 136-144.

has arisen *here*, at this specific juncture. In Williams's words, 'Reason serves by exposing contradiction, showing the incomplete nature of this inhabiting and declaring that this need not be'.⁹³² It is about thinking *why* certain errors – or even atrocities have come about – rather than declaring that they have developed from some necessary logic.⁹³³ We have to be wary of any position that underwrites prophecies of 'foredoomed failure' that assert 'the impossibility of public virtue'.⁹³⁴ Both of these are fatal for a truly transformative politics. To avoid this gloomy picture, we need to re-think political progress not in 'tragic' terms – that is, in terms of inevitable defeat (here adopting Rose's lexicon), but rather as a 'comedy' in which the self is able to recognize its mistakes, without self-laceration or 'aberrated' mourning.⁹³⁵ Our diagnosis of error involves us in thinking more comprehensively about how structures have contributed to disorder, and also invites us 'To know and think the complicity in and by which my agency is formed'.⁹³⁶

The picture of the self that has emerged in this section is one that is time-bound and relational, one formed through interpersonal and historical development. For Williams, the self emerges through temporal growth, as it is pulled, knowingly or unknowingly, by its desire for the Good – that is, God. On this model, because it is de-centered, the constitution of the self is kenotic, in the sense of having an identity that is primordially given, and therefore not to be grasped. The temporal aspect of the self's development is bound up with potential loss, and therefore has a certain tragic quality about it. However, this must be placed alongside Williams's assertion that Augustine's metaphysics of the self implies a being-ness discovered as gift, and therefore received in gratitude. Against some readings of Augustine, the self is not a proto-Cartesian *cogito*, but is discovered in movements and displacements of desire, in the unhanding of carapaced identities that restrict the agency of Christ in our lives. But while *kenosis* is an essential part of our moral growth, it is balanced by the continuing advent of desire and the *plerosis* of our participation in the triune life of God. This means that a surrendering of the ego does not necessitate a wounding without relief or healing; on the contrary, it predicates a trust that self-forgetfulness does not betoken complete loss; it works within a hope of plenitude beyond scarcity. Additionally important to note is that since the self is both social and *ek-static*, this implies a certain political vision as well. Following Augustine, Hegel and Rose, Williams argues that there is no concept of the self and one's private goods that can be thought apart from the discovery of shareable goods. The speculative counterpart to this is an account of transcendence and universal goodness that is non-reducible to the local. If such were the case, then there could be no rational mediation of

⁹³² "The Sadness of the King," 25.

⁹³³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹³⁵ Rose, *Mourning Becomes Law*, 65 and *passim*.

⁹³⁶ "The Sadness of the King," 32.

differing accounts of goodness; instead, we would have a Hobbesian picture of scrambling individuals within zero-sum conflicts. It is Williams's position that such a conclusion implies a denial of a common good, and the baptism of a metaphysical and cultural pessimism. We can say in summary then that Williams's Hegelian Augustinianism aims to balance the kenotic and 'tragic' aspects of temporal *distentio* (after Donald MacKinnon) with a 'comic' reading of self-discovery (after Gillian Rose). These clarifications will assist as we move forward in this chapter.

8.3. *Tragedy and Estrangement*

The above summaries regarding language, the self and the pedagogics of time might seem to be an overly-laborious and oblique introduction to our current preoccupation. But it is the contention of this chapter that Williams's recent monograph on the tragic genre should be engaged from this perspective, as we will see shortly. *The Tragic Imagination*⁹³⁷ constitutes Williams's most significant contribution to date on the question of 'the tragic', and therefore deserves engagement, since it also forms one of the most subtle and tightly-argued attempts to bring Christian theology into dialogue with the heritage of tragic drama. However, it has to be mentioned that its appearance brings to fruition an almost career-long interest with ideas related to this topic, and so it is worth tracing genealogically its working within his thinking up to the present time. There are relatively few extensive engagements with Williams on this theme, especially before this book was published,⁹³⁸ and so this essay aims at once show its history within his thinking, as well as expositing its most full-bodied treatment.

The tragic imagination, particularly *King Lear*, had already grasped Williams from a young age and so antedates his tertiary studies.⁹³⁹ But it is widely perceived, and admitted by

⁹³⁷ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

⁹³⁸ See Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 21-27; Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams*, 119-144. There is also some critical comments on Williams's use of the tragic in John Milbank, 'Enclaves, or Where is the Church?' *New Blackfriars* 73.861 (1992), 349-52 and Milbank, 'The Archbishop of Canterbury: The Man and the Theology Behind the Shari'a Lecture,' in Rex J. Adhar and Nicholas Aroney (eds.), *Shari'a in the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 43-58 (pp. 50-53). After this book was published, *Modern Theology* (2018) also published a symposium on *The Tragic Imagination*. The contributions are listed as follows: David Bentley Hart, 'The Gospel According to Melpomene: Reflections on Rowan Williams's *The Tragic Imagination*'. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018): 220-234; Graham Ward, 'Extremities'. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018): 235-242; Giles Waller, 'Felix Culpa? On Rowan Williams's *The Tragic Imagination*'. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018): 243-251; Terry Eagleton, 'Tragedy and Liberalism'. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018): 252-257; Ben Quash, 'The Tragic Imagination and the Ascesis of the Eye'. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018): 258-266; Jennifer Wallace, 'Tragic Remembrance in the Era of Fake News'. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018): 267-272; Regina M. Schwartz, 'The Ethics of the Tragic Imagination'. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018): 273-279; Rowan Williams, 'Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed': A Response to Comments on *The Tragic Imagination*. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018): 280-288.

⁹³⁹ Cf. Todd Breyfogle, 'Time and Transformation: A Conversation with Rowan Williams's. *Cross Currents* 45.3 (1995): 293-311 (p. 295); Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 1.

Williams himself,⁹⁴⁰ that Donald MacKinnon's influence on him was decisive in this regard. What is important to note again is that MacKinnon's attention regarding the tragic occurred within an over-arching moral awareness that resisted, through a contemplation of its refractory qualities, any attempt to claim a finalized human authorship for the world we inhabit. As we have seen in earlier chapters, MacKinnon's precise targets here were idealistic philosophies⁹⁴¹ and Benthamite versions of 'naturalism'.⁹⁴² But more generally-speaking, these criticisms would apply to any egoistic project that adhered to the fantasy that we can circumscribe our reality, bringing it thereby under our teleological mastery. Reality does not strictly adhere to how we conceptualize it, and any claim we could fully grasp it is an exercise in tragic hubris. For MacKinnon, our perception of truth is something that continues to unfold: there is an unflinching and recalcitrant 'objectivity' within our correspondence to reality. And yet, such 'objectivity' is not immediately graspable: much like an artistic craft – here remembering MacKinnon's reference to Cézanne – it takes time for the *realia* to disclose themselves.⁹⁴³ These tendencies, as we will see, are present within Williams's own work, but it will take several decades until they reach mature amplification in *The Tragic Imagination*.

What is particularly noticeable in the early work of Williams is a tragically-imbued sense of *historicity*. Much like MacKinnon, Williams's sensitivity towards 'the complex discipline of temporality'⁹⁴⁴ was distinctly present even in his more youthful forays. In one of his first essays published, entitled 'The Spirit of the Age to Come' (1974),⁹⁴⁵ he speaks of 'an awareness of present reality as divided, fragmented, liable to internal struggle and frustration, an awareness, in fact of the *tragic*'.⁹⁴⁶ It is within this context that the Spirit works to cultivate practices of hope and redemptive longing that are precisely *not* extractions from lived history, that is, they are not a 'negation or abolition of what has gone before'.⁹⁴⁷ If they were abstractions, they would imply a denial of the goodness of creation, and also it would reduce the Spirit's futurity as working on the same plane as other historical events.⁹⁴⁸ But even more strikingly, these contentions are grounded Christologically, in a Johannine and quasi-Lutheran

⁹⁴⁰ Cf. Rowan Williams, 'Obituary: Donald MacKinnon'. *The Tablet* (March 12, 1994), 31. See also, Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 1.

⁹⁴¹ MacKinnon, 'Idealism and Realism: An Old Controversy Renewed' and 'The Conflict Between Realism and Idealism: Remarks on the Significance for the Philosophy of Religion of a Classical Philosophical Controversy Recently Renewed,' in *Explorations in Theology*, 138-50; 151-65 resp.

⁹⁴² *The Problem of Metaphysics*, 44-5, 145.

⁹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 104-113.

⁹⁴⁴ MacKinnon, 'The Relation of the Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity,' in Richard W. A. McKinney (ed.), *Christ, Creation and Culture: Essays in Honour of T.F. Torrance* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 104.

⁹⁴⁵ Williams, 'The Spirit of the Age to Come'. *Sobernost: The Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius* 6.9 (1974): 613-26.

⁹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 616.

⁹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 614.

⁹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 614-615.

fashion, through his ontological identification of the crucified and risen Christ.⁹⁴⁹ Within this model, the church itself can be strikingly read as ‘a communion in horror and in glory’. This is because we are still ‘in history, that history where tragedy occurs’, in which ‘the gift of the Spirit is a gift that increases our vulnerability to a terrifying degree’, and ‘are left exposed and humanly defenseless before the universal weight of tragedy’, since the Spirit into which we are incorporated is a ‘Spirit of kenosis’ that translates, into our varying contexts, the experience of the cross and resurrection.⁹⁵⁰ These revelations betray a starkness of vision from early on that is simultaneously realist and non-pessimistic in character, a kind of traversal of the optimism-pessimism binary altogether. This opinion is further weighted upon the consideration that, for Williams, classical tragedy already understood itself as a literary-dramatic mode of protest, which in its aesthetic constitution denied passivity and silence.⁹⁵¹

But it is also substantiated by the Christian belief that the presence of the Spirit in the here-and-now constitutes an anticipation of a future hidden within the present. This contemporaneity of the Spirit gives believers the ‘power and confidence to *act*’ because of the expectancy put before them.⁹⁵² Many of these thoughts remain with Williams up to the present, but it is worth mentioning one area where there is a marked difference, namely, his reading of Hegel. In this early text, Williams still read Hegel as putting forward the notion that tragedy was about a conflict between rival goods – as in Sophocles’s *Antigone* – provoking situations where ‘the good is divided against itself’.⁹⁵³ Such a reading is hardly reconcilable with his later view that conflicting goods should not be seen as absolute. Instead, the *agon* of ethical difference should be submitted to a dispossessive negotiation, with the aim of discovering where the node of conflict truly lies. As regards ‘tragedy’, Williams would come to see Hegel’s reading of *Antigone* as focused less on the question of mutually exclusive goods, and rather on the problem of *one-sidedness* (*Einseitigkeit*) in our understanding of the good. But since this problematic will be discussed in more detail below, we will hold off further discussion until then.

Returning to the genealogy, we should emphasize again that this vision of a redemption not bypassing ‘the historical’ remains an assumption throughout Williams’s theology up until the present day, as we will see. It is particularly apparent in his (as yet) unpublished lectures on Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (delivered twice during 1974-1975),⁹⁵⁴ which could be read (if one could summarize them) as an expanded commentary on Eliot’s line in *Burnt Norton* that

⁹⁴⁹ Ibid., 619.

⁹⁵⁰ Ibid., 622-623.

⁹⁵¹ Ibid., 624.

⁹⁵² Ibid., 624-625.

⁹⁵³ Ibid., 616.

⁹⁵⁴ See Khegan Delpont, ‘Towards a Visionary and Historical Consciousness: Rowan Williams’s *Four Quartets Lectures* (1974-1975)’. *Studia Historia Ecclesiastica* 43.3 (2017): 1-26.

‘Only through time time is conquered’.⁹⁵⁵ This central motif of Eliot’s was, for Williams, simply an outworking of the poet’s adherence to the ‘gospel’ as a form of ‘incarnational religion’.⁹⁵⁶ He argued that Eliot’s own poetic practice of writing displayed a process of learning in which, through the labour of composition, he discovered that the original conclusions of *Burnt Norton* could not be the final word on the matter. This insight explains the oppositional voices displayed in the remaining poems which often place a question mark next to Eliot’s initial statements regarding ‘the immutable present’.⁹⁵⁷ In Williams’s estimation, this vision failed to account for the diachronic, and reduced the present into a ‘timeless’ abstraction.⁹⁵⁸ This shows that Williams already at this point had a deep sense of the pedagogics of time and irony, of how our temporal endurance implies a continuing movement of moral education that can only be avoided through a collapse into the fantasies of the ego, or what Eliot calls ‘a world of speculation’.⁹⁵⁹ This history to which we are subjected, to be sure, is a history of wreckage and disaster, one that could even be read as ‘Godless’ – as is made clear in Eliot’s *The Dry Salvages*.⁹⁶⁰

The Christian faith, Williams stresses, cannot be an attempt to mitigate these refractory aspects of the world; on the contrary, he says that the ‘incarnation’ both ‘validates’ and ‘condemns’ us to the ‘unresolved tensions’ of history.⁹⁶¹ However, we should not read this insight as implying an unreconstructed pessimism, since particularities are still able to formulate themselves into ‘a pattern of unified beauty’.⁹⁶² The vision of *Little Gidding*’s fulgurating and pentecostal dynamism shows, on the one hand, that our moments are able to be redeemed in the ‘crowned knot of fire’,⁹⁶³ without, on the other, ceding their concrete individuality. Already apparent here, in these early lectures, is a deep sense of how for us ‘the complex discipline of temporality’ is an unavoidable element for human growth. Our redemption cannot be understood as an ‘escape’ from the strictures of time and embodiedness without resulting in a denial of our humanity and, for Christians, the truths of incarnation. For Williams, as for the church fathers, the unassumed is the unhealed.⁹⁶⁴ But the stringent

⁹⁵⁵ Eliot, ‘Burnt Norton II’, in *Collected Poems*, 180.

⁹⁵⁶ Williams, ‘The Four Quartets (1975)’, lecture 1 (unpublished), 1. Brett Gray has characterized these lectures as being examples of Williams’s *incarnational historicism* (cf. *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams*, 44-49).

⁹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5-8.

⁹⁵⁹ ‘The Four Quartets (1975)’, lecture 2, 2. The quote is taken from ‘Burnt Norton I’, *Collected Poems*, 177.

⁹⁶⁰ ‘The Four Quartets (1975)’, lecture 3, 7.

⁹⁶¹ ‘The Four Quartets (1975)’, lecture 4, 5.

⁹⁶² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁶³ ‘Little Gidding V’, in *Collected Poems*, 209.

⁹⁶⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, ‘Letter 101,’ in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 155-66. This aspect of temporality remains important for Williams, as can be seen in his reading of the figure of Prince Myshkin; cf. *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction*

application of this antique dogma needs to hold even for those most difficult, tragic aspects of reality that refuse easy consolation, even those experiences, as Williams readily admits, which invite conclusions of historical ‘godlessness’.

Such hyperbolic and vertiginous language re-appears in several texts written shortly after he delivered his lectures on the *Four Quartets*, as for instance where he starkly admonishes believers of the fact that God will not wipe the tears away from our eyes until ‘we have learned to weep’.⁹⁶⁵ There are also comments (found in a review essay) that reiterate the vision expounded in his lectures on *The Dry Salvages*: ‘God is revealed in the death of Jesus, revealed in his cry of dereliction, revealed in Gethsemane [and] all this is straining language to the breaking point’, that is, ‘because what we are affirming is that God is revealed by his *absence*, revealed in the condition of ‘Godlessness’...a world of chaos, anguish and senselessness’.⁹⁶⁶ Similar motifs of extremity are noticeable in a sermon on T.S. Eliot (given in 1984, but published in 1995) that shows the longevity of this vision within his thinking.⁹⁶⁷

But cognate disclosures can also be discovered in a longer essay, penned within the same general period, called ‘Poetic and Religious Imagination (1977)’.⁹⁶⁸ He spoke there of finding ‘a place’ within ‘the disordered flux’ – which is a good definition of ‘personal maturity’, he adds. It is about finding a ‘position’, a ‘direction’ that orientates us amongst the world’s seemingly disparate constituency. In language that anticipates Gillian Rose’s work, he speaks of making and taking forward ‘an *option* about reality’,⁹⁶⁹ one that forms an aesthetic protest against meaninglessness, and opposes political postures that seek to close-down the range of human language. This curtailing of creative reference can only imply a foreclosure of the claims of history and its continued opening up of human conversation and meaning. ‘Significance is a function of communication’, which means that establishing meaning cannot be reduced to ‘an individual matter’, because the artist does not offer us a moment of self-expression, but rather an ‘incomplete’ picture of his or her ‘world’ which is then offered to us

(Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008), 47-57. Also see Williams, ‘Augustine’s Christology: Its Spirituality and Rhetoric,’ in Peter W. Martens (ed.), *In the Shadow of the Incarnation: Essays on Jesus Christ in the Early Church in Honour of Brian E. Daley, S.J.* (Indiana, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 176-89.

⁹⁶⁵ Williams, ‘To Give and Not to Count the Cost: A Sermon Preached at Mirfield in February 1976’. *Sobernost: The Journal of the Fellowship and St. Alban and St. Sergius* 7.5 (1977): 401-403 (p. 403).

⁹⁶⁶ Williams, ‘Person’ and ‘Personality’ in Christology’. *Downside Review* 94 (1976): 253-260 (p. 259). Also compare the another contemporary statement regarding divine absence: ‘Life in the polis is life in the world from which God has withdrawn for the sake of its liberty. It is thus life charged with ambiguity, vulnerable to the tragic. There are no final solutions – the very words have appalling connotations. History and the polis are where God is condemned to death’. For this quotation, see Rowan Williams, ‘Mankind, Nation, State,’ in Paul Bellard and Huw Jones (eds.), *This Land and This People* (Cardiff: Collegiate Centre of Theology, University College, 1979), 119-125 (p. 124).

⁹⁶⁷ Cf. See his sermon ‘Lazarus: In Memory of T.S. Eliot,’ in *A Ray of Darkness*, 186-191.

⁹⁶⁸ Williams, ‘Poetic and Religious Imagination’. *Theology* 80 (1977): 178-187.

⁹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

as something ‘not yet fully realized or grasped’, and to which we are invited to respond.⁹⁷⁰ This struggle with incompleteness, the experience of ‘irony’, the sense that every attempt at creative re-description is a falling short of the whole picture, is an intrinsic part of the poet’s growth in maturity.⁹⁷¹ At this point, we are beginning to see an argument that anticipates the emphasis on tragic irony and one-sidedness to be found in his later work.

In his contribution to Donald MacKinnon’s *Festschrift* (delivered in 1986 and published in 1989), he adumbrates many of the themes which will recur in his most recent volume on this topic.⁹⁷² There he said that if ‘the world is our creation, or even if the world is masterable as a system of necessities, the idea of irreparable and uncontrollable *loss* ceases to make sense: there are no tragedies’.⁹⁷³ A further expansion reads thus:

All explanation of suffering is an attempt to forget it as suffering, and so a quest for untruthfulness...The resolution of the sheer resistant particularity of suffering, past and present, into comfortable teleological patterns is bound to blunt the edge of particularity, and so to lie; and this lying resolution contains that kind of failure in attention that is itself a moral deficiency, a fearful self-protection. It is just this that fuels the fantasy that we can choose how the world and myself shall be.⁹⁷⁴

The moral register that we have mentioned previously reoccurs here: the invocation of an irrepressible tragic element within the human and natural world serves to highlight our contingent location and boundaries, with the purpose of showing how such an awareness of human limitation can provide imaginative resources for ‘transformative *action*’.⁹⁷⁵ This is because ‘the tragic *by definition* deals with human limit’, with ‘what is not to be changed, with a pain that is ‘non-negotiable’.⁹⁷⁶ In itself, this might suggest a model of ‘acceptance’ that is ‘ideological’ in its conceits.⁹⁷⁷ However, Williams suggests on the contrary that ‘it is *one’s own* appropriation of the limits of possibility’ that serves as a ‘protest against a polity and culture that lure us to sink our truthful perceptions’ into ‘a collective, mythologized identity that can shut its eyes to limits’.⁹⁷⁸ But ‘the possible world of truthful perception’ does not fall to us from the sky but is ‘*made* possible, however precariously and impermanently, for actual persons in communication with each other’. In a sentence that summarizes a

⁹⁷⁰ Ibid., 180.

⁹⁷¹ Ibid., 183.

⁹⁷² Williams, ‘Trinity and Ontology,’ in *On Christian Theology*, 148-166.

⁹⁷³ Ibid., 154-155.

⁹⁷⁴ Ibid., 155.

⁹⁷⁵ Ibid., 162.

⁹⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁷⁸ Ibid., 163.

position he will expand on later, he writes that ‘Tragedy is capable of being lived with and articulated because...of the particular, the narratively specific, out of which certain kinds of new language grow’.⁹⁷⁹ What is apparent again here is how an awareness of the temporal limits of human action can serve as a truly creative source for human transformation. This is not to imply that suffering as such is invested with a transcendent significance, because this would imply again an attempt to access a *locus standi* apart from the fray of contingency,⁹⁸⁰ a supra-temporal position from which such deprivation could be aesthetically plotted.⁹⁸¹ It would be a denial of that truth to which tragedy is an exemplary disclosure. This emphasis on the ‘always-already’, non-extricable aspect of our involvement in history (and its often-tragic implications) is often reiterated in his friendly, but critical, engagements with John Milbank on the question of tragedy⁹⁸², and is also apparent in his writings on Gillian Rose.⁹⁸³

Responding to a rather critical review of *The Tragic Imagination* (written by the classicist Edith Hall), Williams encapsulated his monograph on tragedy within this problematic: rather than ‘attempting to force Greek tragedy into a Christian mould’, Williams said that he wanted ‘to grant the full weight of its negativity’ and probe further as to whether ‘Christian discourse’ would be able to ‘sustain’ such ‘negativity’.⁹⁸⁴ Williams does not expand here upon his sense of ‘negativity’, but what we have read up to this point provides some indication: it is a shorthand for ‘what is utterly unresolved in the human experience’ (1).⁹⁸⁵ For Williams, tragedy is concerned with how ‘language’ is able to accommodate ‘unwelcome truth’ and its ‘own failure to master extreme experience’ (1). But such accommodation is entwined with the production of ‘new knowledge’, since ‘we are not simply passive in the face of terror and suffering, because we can *imagine* it, narrate it, make pictures of it that make it an agenda for others and for ourselves’ (1-2). When ‘ordered community’ is ‘shaken’ we look for words even in ‘extremity’ to make sense of the ‘challenge’ or ‘pressure’ before us (2). So rather than indicating a sense of inescapable doom, one could argue that tragic drama simply ‘assumes that practically unspeakable things happen’ and that our various ‘concordats with reality are as fragile as could be’ (2). But this is not the same as sheer passivity, since ‘language’ which

⁹⁷⁹ Ibid., 164.

⁹⁸⁰ Ibid., 155-156.

⁹⁸¹ See Williams’s comments on theodicy, in ‘Redeeming Sorrows: Marilyn McCord Adams and the Defeat of Evil,’ in *Wrestling with Angels*, 255-74. Williams’s criticisms of Adams are centrally focused on her attempt to aesthetically resolve the problem of evil via the notion of ‘proportion’. Williams thinks this theory fails to account for the complexity of how diverse stories of suffering are appropriated by *human* agents. It also, unfortunately, seems to adopt a model of divine action that is rather onto-theological and metaphysically unsophisticated, treating God’s activity as a kind of human form of intervention, with the exception being that is on a transcendentally superior scale.

⁹⁸² Williams, ‘Saving Time: Thoughts, Patience and Vision’. *New Blackfriars* 73.861 (1992): 319-326.

⁹⁸³ See the discussion of Hegel and Rose in our previous section.

⁹⁸⁴ Rowan Williams, ‘Tragedy and Redemption: A Response to Edith Hall’ (December 19, 2016). *Prospect* (accessed from www.prospectmagazine.co.uk, 21/3/2017).

⁹⁸⁵ The pagination for *The Tragic Imagination* is cited in parentheses.

takes tragedy seriously sits uncomfortably with certain visions of the world ('an instrumentalizing and managerial spirit, an anxious shrinking of language into cliché and formula, a nervousness around emotional risk and exposure', etc.). It is not supinely *laissez-faire* in posture, or reducible to a Nietzschean *amor fati*. We could rather say that it is concerned with how we 'speak without false consolation in a world like this', hopeful of the fact that language (and 'religious language' in particular) is able to account for the reality of 'non-resolution' within our experience; not out of a sense of 'pessimism', but in a rather 'odd confidence' that our language is 'not so easily exhausted or defeated' by these realities (3).

By way of clarifying our treatment, one could summarize Williams's harmonization of Christianity and the tragic in the following way. The first thing to say is that tragedy avoids pessimism by showing that 'suffering can be narrated' and therefore 'communicatively or imaginatively shared', becoming thereby 'a *cultural* fact'. Reading tragedy in this way means that 'existential guilt', or understanding 'identity as burden and trap, would have to be modified as soon as this becomes a matter of language and representation', because as he states, 'identity is reconfigured in exchange and recognition'. As a result of this, we become *strange* to ourselves. The adoption of such a posture would instigate, as a consequence, both 'a critique of fatalism' and 'an affirmation of value', a refusal of any proposal that we are damned to meaninglessness.

The second point to mention is the centrality of 'irony' for tragedy, which in its own way stifles the totalization of pessimism. For him, 'if tragedy is the sheer burden of existence, that would leave us with another non-ironic model'. Tragic drama specifically – and implicitly, 'the tragic' as such – is concerned with 'the unbearable nature of finitude'. Such is reflected within the performativity of tragic drama itself since 'There is no generative gap between what the dramatic agent knows and what we know', because there is a shared 'awareness of ignorance in both the dramatic characters and the observing audience'. The reason why this resists metaphysical pessimism is because irony shows that since we do not know the outcome, we cannot know how 'the mere fact of narration, the *following on* from the record of horror and failure' will change the meaning of the unfolding circumstance (132). Things could get worse, even when we think they cannot sink any lower. The bottom could fall even more, revealing new tonalities of horror (e.g. *Agamemnon*, *Choephoroi*, *Antigone*, *The Women of Trachis*, *Oedipus the King*, *Medea*, *The Bacchae*). But the opposite could be true as well: circumstances can take a surprising turn towards happier outcomes (e.g. *The Eumenides*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Alceste*). And it should be stressed again: even if things get worse, the very fact that they are able to be communicated shows that meaningful engagement with suffering is not finally excluded. These two points regarding 'narration' and 'irony' give us orientation for what is to follow.

In a remarkably distilled treatment of ‘the political roots of tragedy’, Williams speaks of the origins of Attic tragedy within the staging of the City Dionysia of Athens,⁹⁸⁶ in which the citizens are invited ‘to contemplate disaster and suffering, chains of events unleashed by rash action...engulfing guilty and innocent alike’. This occurs within ‘the context of a celebration both of the city’s solid identity and the god associated with the dangerous realm of excess’, namely Dionysos. It is this theme of *danger* that becomes prevalent within Greek drama (5), the sense that reality is unstable and requires some kind of containment. But in order for these narratives to be brought home, such a presentation of danger requires familiarity (6), which is why tragedies draw upon the stock of common fable and legend. And yet, the risk is that a mere repetition of ancient and familiar tales might not appear to give a sense of ‘continuing threat or risk’.

But as Williams insightfully suggests, ‘the fact of repetition itself declares that we have not yet—*never* yet—grasped the nature of the danger being represented. We tell the familiar story because we know that we do not yet know it’, because ‘we don’t know yet what the scale of the danger is’ (7). Stories, as they are re-told, become “readable” in more than one way, and as ‘the dramatic complexity increases, so does the danger experienced by the audience, despite the familiarity of the story being represented’ (7). They teach us that ‘we cannot be certain of what is past’ (9). This tendency of increasing danger, this intensification of ‘risk’, seems to be further nuanced and increased, not only in the transition from story to dramatic re-telling, but even *within* the development of the tragic genre from Aeschylus to Euripides (8). But Williams also wants to stress that since tragedy occurred within the context of ‘ritual’ and ‘liturgy’, this assumes that, to a certain extent, ‘it can in some degree manage, if not control the Dionysian’, but only if it is willing ‘to be rediscovered again and again by posing new challenges to it, testing it to destruction’ (9). To quote further

the tragic’ is originally a function of how a verbal and visual representation works in the mind of a community gathered to celebrate or affirm its resilience and legitimacy in full awareness of the fragility that always pervades its life. It exists in the disturbing gap between that affirmation and a complementary recognition: the acknowledgement that we do not have a *final* point of view about the crises or catastrophes which both haunt and justify the existence of the political order (10).

One of the precipitous occupations of tragedy is its portrayal of ‘the different pressures and impulses that are at work on actual agents in the world’. Tragedy ‘obliges us to pay attention to sheer *circumstance*’, to the fact that we live in a world in which ‘the fantasy of a virtue that

⁹⁸⁶ See Simon Goldhill, ‘The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology’. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107 (1987): 58-76.

has no cost' is constantly being undermined (11). The city's self-description, as found within Greek drama, is concerned to show 'a divinely ordered balance of different obligations running in different directions' that requires 'law as the institutionalized means of recognizing these multiple interdependencies'. It is within this context that 'the individual agent' is presented as 'always *implicated*', as 'always defined by unchosen connections and the obligations that come with them'. This is because 'Human action is not a simple assertion of the individual will but a *thinking-through* of the diverse sorts of connection that we inhabit', with the purpose of discerning 'courses of action that are as truthful as possible and as little harmful as possible' (13).

Williams, here drawing on the work of Martha Nussbaum, argues that tragedy aims to 'handle danger by challenging the idea that obligations can be so ordered that we will never collide' (15). There is no social space in which we are completely safe, in which our actions are immune to asseverations of conflict and loss. But it is precisely through narration that tragic drama acts as 'a vehicle for managing loss'. As long as these events 'can be spoken of', we are not 'reduced to absolute silence or paralysis' (15-16). Adopting the language of Nussbaum again,⁹⁸⁷ Williams says tragedy is a mode of representation that provides healing without giving a 'cure' for what ails us (16). Tragedies do not necessarily give us a 'happy ending' in which all deprivations have been resolved, but rather provoke us to an 'urgency' regarding the containment of such repercussions, without 'softening the atrocity or making more bearable what should be terrible to us' (17). An avoidance of seeing or speaking about such things would imply that 'the self and the city' would become 'less secure', since the refusal to know leaves intact 'the very mechanisms from which the drama is supposed to deliver us' (17).

Williams is also concerned to distinguish his account from some pervasive understandings of tragedy which reduce the question of 'conflict' to one of 'duties', since this seems to stem from a rather 'modern argument' that 'demands a central figure who is distinguished by 'nobility' of spirit, a figure who is morally sophisticated enough to grasp the seriousness of rival imperatives' – as seen in post-Kantian accounts of the tragic. On the contrary, as should be clear from tragic drama and our experiences, 'tragedy does not affect only the morally sophisticated' (25). Rather its more basic impulse lies in the fact that our social relations are 'breakable' (25), and that we are herein confronted with 'the utterly unpredictable dissolutions of human solidarity and humanist stability', in which we become aware of 'the *fact* of our not-knowing', the fact that we might have '*never* really known', where the danger truly resides (27). Here echoing Gillian Rose, Williams provides us with a call to recognize our precarity, to acknowledge our complicity within these dynamics, and therefore to convert

⁹⁸⁷ Martha.C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (rev. ed, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 82.

from habits that continue to entrench such structures. This should not take the form of self-laceration or self-edification, but rather should focus on the question of ‘law’: how is it that certain *institutions* continue to reinforce or allow the existence of historical tragedy or ‘atrocities’? It is an invitation to *think* about why these realities continue to exist (26-27).

This problem of knowledge is deepened in Williams’s appropriation of Cavellian ideas regarding skepticism and Shakespearean drama.⁹⁸⁸ For Cavell, tragedy is about ‘what we *know* and do not acknowledge’; or more specifically, it concerns ‘the failure to *acknowledge what we know*’. In this universe, we ‘seek a complete and unmediated transparency and fail to tolerate the ordinary uncertainty that attends the ordinary certainties we know’ (31). It is what happens when ‘the human is denied’, in the sense of being ‘engaged, invested, a participant in language and so in interdependence’ (32). It involves ‘*refusing* to be conscious of its own urge to resolve tension in favour of a fantasized freedom’ (34). For Williams, and Cavell, our attendance to tragic drama provokes a sense that time is needed for the drama to unfold, that our learning is temporally bound to the mediation of plot and development. This is exposed when reflecting on the physicality of such attendance: Williams says that if ‘we watch a tragic drama, we are deliberately immobilized; we cannot respond as we should do to human suffering in other circumstances’. This experience ‘reinforces the recognition of *separateness*’, that we have ‘to *allow to happen what the tragic agents on stage are struggling not to allow*’ (35). Here Williams is underscoring the contemplative dimension of tragedy, which involves our attention to the ‘inexhaustible dense ‘solidity’ of the other’ (36). It allows ‘difference’ to unfold, to not promote a premature closure of the narrative. As he says in his commentary on *King Lear* (referencing the statement in Act IV.1 that ‘The worst is not/ So long as we can say “This is the worst”’):

No reconciliation on this personal scale will be adequate to the unreconciled reality that prevails all around and that may once again intrude into the lives of the reconciled. ‘This is the worst’ is a statement that seeks to close down the history of suffering; now we know how bad it can be. But the drama declares that we do not know how bad it can be, and that this is one of those things we must *know* that we don’t know (41).

And yet, this ‘it-could-be-worse’ attitude does not necessitate pessimism: ‘The business of tragedy is neither to tell us that the world is more bearable than it is nor to insist that it is ‘absolutely’ unbearable’. On the contrary, tragedy transcends such binaries by showing ‘how *some* pain can be spoken of and understood, ‘humanized’, and some cannot, because the

⁹⁸⁸ Cf. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

words are not yet there' (41). It does not exclude the various agencies of suffering subjects who are able to grasp suffering precisely as *human* suffering, that is, a pain that can be thought and shared beyond sheer passivity (42-45). But even at this level of sharing and communication (here drawing upon the figure of Iago from Shakespeare's *Othello*), Williams says that there are potential ironies and ambiguities, since the possibility remains that the suffering of others can be co-opted in a narrative which serves *our own* ideological interests, rather than giving space to their unique deprivations (45-51). Our re-telling and exaptation of 'the pain of others' (Sontag) might be liable to miss the particular contours of such stories, and constitutes a moral failure since it implies, once again, a return to a form of narration that colonizes these extremities for our own purposes. It implies, at the level of practice, a denial of *difference*.

This concern with difference, as has been hinted at earlier, is central to Williams's reading of Hegel. And since Hegel has proved, like Aristotle, to be a central figure within the philosophical reception of tragedy, Williams devotes an entire chapter to Hegel (one that draws on the work of Gillian Rose⁹⁸⁹ and Stephen Houlgate⁹⁹⁰). As Houlgate argues, for Hegel 'The problem in Greek tragic drama is that each individual is so absorbed by [their own] governing "pathos"', and that they fail 'to respect (or even recognize) the justified pathos that moves another individual'.⁹⁹¹ Tragedy is produced through an adherence to one's pathos in a '*one-sided way*'⁹⁹², in a fashion that is '*unyielding*'⁹⁹³ in the face of the claims of other agents. For this reason, it is tragic and self-destructive since it fails to internalize the truth within opposing perspectives. However, Hegel's argument should not be misunderstood (as it often is): such ethical contradiction is not an unavoidable metaphysical datum, but is rather the consequence of intransigent human actors who fail to acknowledge a judicious balance of concerns.⁹⁹⁴ Tragic conflict is aimed then at 'reconciliation' and harmonization, since it desires to produce in the audience a sense of 'justice' by displaying the catastrophic outcome for agents who are one-sidedly and individualistically committed to their own stake on things.⁹⁹⁵ In Williams's own words, tragedy for Hegel is about a *misrecognition* in which the subject understands themselves as 'already unified', fully identified with 'an embodied ethical value' and a 'particular imperative' that denies 'another subject's equally misrecognized self-identification' (57). It implies a failure to *learn*, to see the other has having a claim that deserves attention and respectful engagement. And it is this, rather than

⁹⁸⁹ Cf. Rose, *Mourning Becomes Law*, 63-76.

⁹⁹⁰ Stephen Houlgate, 'Hegel's Theory of Tragedy,' in Stephen Houlgate (ed.), *Hegel and the Arts* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 146-178.

⁹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 149

⁹⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 166

⁹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 158-61.

‘fate’, that explains the disaster of the *dramatis personae*, as exemplified in Sophocles’s *Antigone* (58-66).

In this drama, both Creon and Antigone articulate truths that are good in themselves: as regards Creon, ‘we owe respect and the ritual acknowledgement of dignity to those who have not broken the basic contract of human community’, and for Antigone it is the case that ‘we owe respect to any and all, because nothing is more universal than the death we all confront’ (61). The problem of Creon and Antigone is that they have ‘made themselves fixed objects of self-contemplation. Their identities and value are as solid and externalized as the principles they uphold’. But for Williams, any self so constructed is ‘a *fiction*’ since no self can be understood as ‘an atomized external object’ (63). More specifically, ‘Creon’s problem is that he wants to absolve himself of obligation in a particular and extreme case; while Antigone’s problem is that she treats obligation as having no specific content beyond the recognition of a general claim that is based on the universal fact of mortality’ (62). Such exemplifies the dilemma of ‘law’ itself, as Williams has said elsewhere, namely that ‘law by its very nature must be forgetful of the particular, and that ‘if it is recaptured or restructured by the particular, it risks returning to the level of violence and contest, and so to the level of what cannot be thought’. But this is not all that needs to be said, since ‘to maintain law at the expense of the particular is potentially to unleash the same unthought violence’ upon human society. Thus there is a constantly shifting perspective, or even a ‘metaphysics’, that is required here to account for ‘the singular that eludes category and the universal without which we cannot think past “coercive” definition’.⁹⁹⁶ Here again, we encounter the Aristotelian aporia between the individual and the universal, between the τόδε τι and the τί ἐστίν.⁹⁹⁷

This concept of lawfulness also forms for Hegel the intrinsic source of ‘conflict’ within modern tragic drama, with the difference here that law is no longer tied ‘essentially to an ‘externalized pressure’, a ‘set of imperatives ‘out there’ with which the agent is driven to identify’. Rather, it is about ‘an ultimately self-contained model of integrity and authenticity’ (64), a tragic ‘necessity’ that is bound-up with ‘certain kinds of misrecognition’ that is ‘bound to destroy human agents’, and is, therefore, *not* about the ‘mechanically inevitable’ (71). Tragic drama consequently is able to provoke within us reasoned reflection, but not in the sense that rationality will simply produce ‘triumphant order’. Instead, we are invited to sympathize with the characters in their misrecognition, and therefore are made aware of ‘what we must search out and change in ourselves’ (72). This ‘comic’ reading of Hegel, which Williams draws from Rose, undermines the conclusion that ‘existence is tragic’, or any ‘fully tragic worldview’ (Nietzsche is presumably the target here), since that would mean that ‘there is no continuity in thought’, no ‘perspective from which we can see what it is for humans to

⁹⁹⁶ Williams, “The Sadness of the King,” 21-22

⁹⁹⁷ Cf. *Mourning Becomes Law*, 56.

live unreal, deluded, and profoundly pain-ridden lives'. The 'comedy' of Hegel here is that 'there is nothing that cannot be looked at truthfully' (74); and such an acknowledgement already militates against a conception of tragedy as inherently pessimistic, because herein we are made aware of 'the *sources* of particular kinds of error and suffering' (76), and how they might be avoided. Here again we are made aware of how a conflictive account of exclusionary goods is unable to underwrite a transformative politics, and rather promotes an ontology of unrelenting violence.

It is for this reason, amidst others, that Williams distances himself from George Steiner's reading of tragic 'extremity'. Steiner has spent a significant portion of his career making the argument that tragedy is a very limited and specific category of artistic presentation, one that is no longer attainable within a strictly *modern* consciousness. Steiner, to be sure, does not celebrate this loss, but simply points us to the fact that the cultural imaginary that once nourished tragic drama is longer an assumed index of reference. This is not because 'modern suffering is not interesting enough' but rather that 'our representation of suffering has become thinner' (83). Steiner's import is that within modern technological and scientific framing, the erstwhile givens of divine 'grace' – that which exceeds the merely human – are no longer taken as given. Therefore suffering is rendered simply as an 'environmental malfunction' rather than an 'irredeemable loss'. In this perspective, 'no tragic vision' is possible any longer (83). Without any sense of 'presence'⁹⁹⁸ or 'the sacred', meanings are always going to be 'disposable and exchangeable, never crushingly difficult'. There will no longer be any true depth to our engagement, or any 'words for what we are *bound* to wrestle with' (84). For a 'culture in which all signs are exchangeable, or in which no signs have a value that cannot be renegotiated', it is doubtful that such a culture will be able to deal with 'the idea of inescapable *cost*' (100-101), since any 'language' which celebrates the 'entirely fluid would be inimical to tragedy' because 'it would treat loss as an invitation to compensation, not as an invitation to mourning' (101). Here Williams appears to be echoing the sentiments of MacKinnon as regards the interplay between 'transcendence' and 'the tragic', since (as he has said elsewhere) 'Without the evocation ... of God in [tragic] narratives, the scope of human actuality would be denied or reduced'.⁹⁹⁹

Up to this point at least, Williams seems to support Steiner's concerns; where he differs is in regards to his theory of 'absolute tragedy'. Herein, Steiner attempts to articulate a rather narrow canon of tragic drama that reduces it to the finally and utterly disastrous, in which human beings, so to speak, are placed before the yawning, unspeakable horror of being

⁹⁹⁸ Cf. Steiner, *Real Presences* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).

⁹⁹⁹ *Grace and Necessity*, 120.

itself.¹⁰⁰⁰ It is this conceptualization which most coheres with Steiner's attempt to relate the essence of tragic consciousness to the post-Shoah milieu. But Williams's central gravamen is that Steiner, ultimately, reads tragedy as 'a *text*' rather than a 'shared event' (85): he fails, in Williams's mind, to account for tragedy precisely as *drama* (86). Here the dedication to find a 'pure and definitive literary form is always shadowed by the passion to *ignore* something in the actual material work' (86). This continuing risk of misprision is inherent within all generalizing accounts of 'the tragic', as Simon Goldhill has already argued.¹⁰⁰¹ But beyond Steiner's hyper-reduction of 'the tragic', Williams seems especially concerned to show how Steiner's reading of tragedy, in fact (against his own stated affinity for renewed notions of 'presence'), is very much attuned with postmodern and Derridean suspicions of embodied communication, tendencies that privilege 'writing' over the human speaking-situation. For Williams, 'the perception of suffering as capable of being spoken about' is excluded by 'Steinerian tragedy', because it is 'compromised as soon as it opens its mouth, because it is committed to representation, and so to an undetermined future exchange of words' (86).

For Steiner, the paradigm of tragedy is the silence of *Timon of Athens* rather than the 'Never, never, never, never, never!' of *King Lear*. This model refuses dialogue, and therefore seems to be undermined, in its focus on textuality, by the actual experience of tragic drama, which assumes that pain can be represented and spoken. Against Steiner's contentions, Williams shows that this is the case even for the most brutalizing and extreme versions of modern drama, like that of Sarah Kane (89-96). Even within these admittedly horrendous narratives, the potential for ethical provocation remains: it gives the opportunity to learn and expand our moral sensibility by showing that our refusal to acknowledge certain truths about ourselves leads to catastrophe. We are again aware here of how tragedy cannot be equated with a pessimistic or capitulatory vision, precisely because it does not leave us with silence and passivity, but rather a form of narration in which pain is 'integrated', even if 'not consoled' (105).

¹⁰⁰⁰ The most extreme sample of this tendency can be found in George Steiner, 'A Note on Absolute Tragedy'. *Journal of Literature & Theology* 4.2 (1990): 147-156. In his words, 'absolute tragedy' asserts that 'human life is a fatality', and 'proclaims axiomatically that it is best not to be born or, failing that, to die young'. It portrays 'men and women as unwanted intruders on creation, as beings destined to undergo unmerited, incomprehensible, arbitrary suffering and defeat'. It proposes 'a negative ontology', which does not 'admit of the rationale or therapy of discourse, be it philosophic or aesthetic', or any 'pragmatic amelioration' for that matter. Absolute tragedy imposes a phenomenology of utter abjection ('Clarity of perception entails a stringent nihilism. Only nothingness is acquitted of the fault, of the error of being'). The conclusions are unremitting: 'The man or woman possessed of the certitude of existential, ontological unwantedness seeks silence and death' (147). Its projections are of 'unequivocal doom', a 'zero-point' that 'gathers all blackness to it' (148). In our modern world – especially within that 'carnival of bestiality' that marks our epoch – we have been subjected to 'the sheer dimensions of the inhuman', in ways that simply 'impose silence' upon us, negating our attempts at representation (151). Metaphysically, this vision is 'heretical', since 'absolute tragedy' proposes an 'innate evil', a 'manichean dialectic', a '*performative mode of despair*' (155).

¹⁰⁰¹ Simon Goldhill, 'Generalizing About Tragedy,' in Rita Felski (ed.), *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 45-65.

It is worth pausing here for a moment to touch on tragedy and the sublime, as this is revealed in the interplay between suffering and its representation. Steiner's proclivities are exemplary of an intellectual proclivity (e.g. Adorno) that theorizes the non-representability of tragic suffering (especially within the post-Shoah epoch). As Brett Gray has argued, such a 'dark ineffability', which is ultimately 'destructive of representation', is traceable to 'the aesthetics of the sublime'. This trajectory bothered Milbank vis-à-vis MacKinnon,¹⁰⁰² and Williams too, particularly as regards certain postmodernists (e.g. Derrida, Lyotard, etc.) who have privileged a 'pathos of perpetual negation'.¹⁰⁰³ Williams has concerns that this tradition of the 'sublime' tends to emphasize 'the intense feelings of moral awe and emotional pathos' without a corresponding focus on its intellectual content (150-151).

One problem derivable from this unsayability is that it hypostasizes evil (e.g. Auschwitz) into an unspeakable or even deified reality: Giorgio Agamben has compared it to a perverse religiosity: an 'adoring in silence, as one does with a god'.¹⁰⁰⁴ Gillian Rose also spoke about a 'Holocaust piety' present within thinkers such as Adorno and Lyotard, who – in her estimate – conceptualized the Shoah as a manifestation of 'the ineffable'. Such 'non-representability' animates the drive '*to mystify something we dare not understand*, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human'.¹⁰⁰⁵ It transcendentalises evil into a substantial entity and converts '*the positivity of evil*' into '*the evil of the positive*'.¹⁰⁰⁶ It demonizes the affirmatory and is finally *logophobic*.¹⁰⁰⁷ This is connected to Rose's critique of 'aberrated mourning' as a form of lament that '*cannot work*' because it remains entrenched in 'melancholia'.¹⁰⁰⁸ Such a refusal of 'inaugurated mourning', as Rose argues in the case of Walter Benjamin,¹⁰⁰⁹ implies a denial of 'mediation' and 'negotiation' (or 'law', to use her recurring term) which leaves us with a stark dualism between the violence of law-making and the 'divine violence' of law-abolition. Here we are denied representation, judgement or mutual recognition, being entrenched in a 'stasis of desertion',¹⁰¹⁰ waiting on God for the anarchic destruction of every law. Here again, we are

¹⁰⁰² Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams*, 142.

¹⁰⁰³ Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics,' 69.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 33.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Rose, *Mourning Becomes Law*, 43.

¹⁰⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁰⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 70, where she speaks of 'the *logophobic* ethos of Derrida's thinking'.

¹⁰⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Gillian Rose, 'Walter Benjamin – Out of the Sources of Modern Judaism,' in *Judaism and Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 175-210. Benjamin's adoption of melancholic themes are linked to his affinities for baroque drama. See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osbourne (London and New York: Verso, 1998). A confirmation of Rose's reading of Benjamin can be found in Agatha Bielik-Robson, 'Walter Benjamin (1892-1940),' in Philip Goodchild and Hollis Phelps (eds.), *Religion and European Philosophy: Key Thinkers from Kant to Žižek* (London: Routledge, 2017), 115-126.

¹⁰¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 209.

dealing with a subtle vision of the Kantian sublime that involves a denial of the mediation of Being through the particularities of beings. It also suggests a canonization of melancholia and pessimism at the expense of an emancipatory ethic.

This theme of pessimism comes forward in his chapter on religious language and tragedy, and it is here that Donald MacKinnon re-appears, refracted again through the critiques of ‘tragic theology’ given by David Bentley Hart and John Milbank, of which we have discussed at length. Overall, it seems that Williams considers Milbank’s critique to be the more serious and nuanced of the two, as can be seen in the space he gives to his arguments. Hart seems to reduce Greek tragedy to ‘a single theme which has to do with the sovereignty of unfriendly fate and the unavoidability of appeasing a violent sacred order’ (111).¹⁰¹¹ But it is a reading that sits rather lightly on detail, and fails to account for how tragedy interrogates notions of ‘lawfulness’, and how even some tragedies (e.g. *Antigone*) display ‘the destructive effect of setting the sacred against itself’ (111). Williams does not go into much detail regarding Hart’s critique here¹⁰¹² – even though it appears to lie in the background of his chapter on Hegel. At this point, his preference is to engage Milbank more extensively.

As we have noted previously, Milbank argues that MacKinnon’s moral philosophy aims to ‘naturalize’ (108) tragic occurrence, since (as he sees it) it is only within ‘the destructively conflicting absolutes of tragic decision that we discover the nature of our human responsibility’ (109). Milbank worries that MacKinnon ‘lacks a theory as to how non-destructive social practices may be created and maintained, and so is trapped in a standoff between purely individual motivation, with whatever integrity it can muster, and the inescapably corrupting and lethal realities of the public world’. MacKinnon is unable to articulate a thicker moral description of *Sittlichkeit*, in which we come to recognize ‘the moral self in the other or in the communal discourse of humanity’. Rather, MacKinnon’s treatment of tragic irresolution seems to imply ‘a near-Manichaean metaphysic’, or even a ‘fundamental sickness or rupture in reality’ (109), that ultimately achieves a non-negotiable and ontological status. For Milbank, the operative mode of ‘tragic narration’ in MacKinnon’s thinking leads to a denial of ‘the significance of narrative itself’, in which human characters are able to ‘genuinely grow and change with the passage of time’, implying an emptying of ‘the very idea of plot’, since it fails to account for the reality of ‘change’ that is bound up with ‘a sequence of narrated events’. In MacKinnon’s account then, it seems, ‘*nothing really alters*’ (110). Where Hart and Milbank’s critiques converge is in their rejection of any ontological

¹⁰¹¹ Hart’s more recent contribution in the *Modern Theology* symposium has not significantly changed Williams’s judgements. In his reading, Hart remains committed to the same essentialism that characterized his earlier reflections in *The Beauty of the Infinite*. Once more, Hart makes little reference to the classical scholarship that many of Williams’s conclusions are predicated on.

¹⁰¹² He does engage Hart to a greater degree in Williams, ‘Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed’: A Response to Comments on The Tragic Imagination’. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018): 280-288. This essay will be referenced in our conclusion to this study.

violence, and in their disavowal of all abstracted accounts of human suffering. For them, this metaphysic would constitute ‘the very opposite of a discipline of specific attention to pain and loss’. Against MacKinnon’s stated concern with particularity and a pluralist realism then, his actual practice is ‘universalizing’ and appears to buttress ‘violence and conflict as the omnipresent conditions of human existence’. In their reading, his tragic vision ultimately ‘mystifies and glamorizes violence’ itself (110).

But Williams does not think the issue is quite so simple: rather than giving-in to a form of politics that privileges personal authenticity, he thinks that for MacKinnon tragedy is not simply about self-discovery in the moment of tragic indecision, where one is confronted with that ‘conflict of duties’ on which one’s personhood is staked. MacKinnon’s more primary concern, rather, is to show how ‘horrors’ can be the result of ‘good intentions’ that are ‘as much personal and relational as they are public or social’ (112). For MacKinnon, ‘ignorance of the effects of our actions’ is the manner in which we experience our finitude and ‘limitedness’, and that it is precisely through internalizing this that we become human beings who ‘*cease* to think and feel in certain ways’, enduring our existential ‘estrangement’ as a part of human ‘growth’ (112). This is another way of saying that our actions cannot avoid precariousness since there is ‘no *historical* end to risk and suffering’, even though we should not imply by this some kind of ‘supertemporal principle or existential curse’ (113). On the contrary

It is simply a matter of parsing what it means to recognize our finitude: narrative itself presupposes the irreversible passage of time and thus the omnipresence of loss...What happens as result of our decisions is not an abstract and identical calamity but always the specific kind of loss that *this* unique set of temporal conditions will generate...the very act of narrating anything at all involves the possibility of *tragic* narration. The passage of time is a process of loss, *identified as such in the act of relating it*. Telling the story of the past is a representation of what both is and is not ‘here’...Yet to recognize this element of loss or absence is not necessarily to be committed to a picture of finite existence as a struggle between fate and the noble but helpless subject. There are no subjects independent of awareness in time, and so to be a human subject is to be involved in understanding that growth, movement in time, [and] entails a letting-go of past identities (113-114).

So our finitude and contingency, our *estrangement* from fixed identities, does not stem from ‘a form of pessimism’, an insuperable woundedness, because ‘if acts and events are uncontrollable in their effect, if we do not know what may flow from this or that happening’, then we cannot exclude the possibility that ‘anguish and atrocity do not make a future

impossible', even if such a future may be 'incurably damaged for at least some'. It does not deny the openness inherent within historical action, nor does it imply that such tragedies 'stop things happening' and 'things being spoken of'. For Williams, tragedy would be 'incompatible' with the 'Christian narrative' only if it advocated 'a form of Stoicism', '[a] reconciliation with the unbearable as inevitable' (115). All that Williams has said thus far should question such a conclusion.

All this is not to say that Williams is in complete unison with MacKinnon's perspective. As Brett Gray has argued, Williams's Augustinianism leads him to privilege a metaphysics more congenial to the claims of orthodoxy, especially regarding the impassible transcendence of the Good. Since Williams presupposes that the human self is 'fundamentally desirous, motivated by its foundational lack of God as its ultimate good',¹⁰¹³ such an anthropology 'transposes' human finitude into 'an almost eudaemonic register', as 'the self's distension' is placed against 'an eschatological horizon' and a 'social manifold' that moves it 'towards repair'.¹⁰¹⁴ Such 'an amelioration of the tragic'¹⁰¹⁵ means that tragedy as such 'does not persist as an intractable fate' since, for Williams, a 'future is always being opened up' by the God who providentially orders it.¹⁰¹⁶ Thus we are enjoined not to place hope not in some primordial harmony, but in the Creator, who has made a world in which the 'good will take time to realise'.¹⁰¹⁷ Such a reading does not exclude that 'healing or mending' can take place.¹⁰¹⁸ nor does it leave out of account that 'work of grace' and 'victory' that is 'never produced by history itself',¹⁰¹⁹ since there is 'no *temporal* mending of the drama'.¹⁰²⁰ Such 'healing' should not bypass or simply cancel those histories that constitute personhood, because that would precisely imply an 'exit from the narrative' (as was noted in Williams's critique of Milbank). So while it must be emphasized that Williams expands and continues MacKinnon's thinking into the present, we should not assume that they are of one accord at every juncture.

As we bring the discussion of this monograph to a close, it could be said Williams's focus on tragic drama is open to the misunderstanding that it is only through *this* kind of narration that we are provoked to 'the unwelcome and subversive knowledge of our flawed self-picturing'. Such a reading might indicate an overly narrow or even Westernized and elitist conclusion – only the privileged are granted such knowledge – a conclusion that is certainly at odds with the spirit of his text. This non-elitism is presupposed in the place he gives to Raymond Williams, who disputed the conclusion that tragedy could not be about 'ordinary'

¹⁰¹³ Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams*, 126.

¹⁰¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 127-128.

¹⁰¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁰¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁰¹⁷ Williams, 'Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision,' 323.

¹⁰¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 321-322

¹⁰¹⁹ Williams, 'Insubstantial Evil,' 118-119.

¹⁰²⁰ Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams*, 140.

people and events (96-101), and is also implied in Williams's, admittedly brief, discussion of African and non-Western drama (137-142). But on a further note, he clearly distances himself from this conclusion by arguing that tragic drama is simply *one* instance of 'dispossession' (a recurrent word in his lexicon, as we have seen) that makes us conscious of 'the world of bodily limit' and 'mutual negotiation' (151). It is not through tragedy *alone* that we are given access to such insights; rather, tragedy forms an intense and acute example of those processes of learning and conversion to which we are constantly enjoined. This leaves open the possibility (though Williams does not explicitly discuss this) of relating his insights on tragic drama to 'narration' more generally, especially in its relation to the communication of trauma.¹⁰²¹ Such an emphasis on 'narrative' might then provide an analogical link between drama and 'ordinary' experiences of suffering, while being fully aware of Williams's caveat that we should not simply reduce 'tragedy' to '*accidental* misfortune' (97-98). But this might also imply that Williams's criticisms of treating tragedy as a 'text' rather than 'drama' (in regard to Steiner) might have to be nuanced further, since there is intriguing evidence that suggests the collective *reading* of tragic texts has produced healing results amongst PTSD sufferers, for instance.¹⁰²² But these are all rather minor quibbles, which do not undermine his concern to show that tragedy is concerned with how we learn through time and human engagement, and about how, consequently, it cannot be equated *tout court* with metaphysical pessimism.

A synthesis of what we have been trying to say as regards Williams can be attempted now: in the previous chapter, we attempted to show why for Williams the very materiality of creating and speaking has metaphysical significance; this is because 'matter' and 'mattering' are profoundly connected for Williams. The process of creating form, of giving shape to the world is *not* a willful imposition on an otherwise non-intelligent environment, but rather a discovery of something excessive within reality itself. Similarly, language and representation always involves us in a super-addition of meaning, because we can never say exactly the *same* thing twice, since representation does not involve a simplistic mirroring procedure. Because of our placement within time, and in a community of language-users, our meaning is

¹⁰²¹ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath or Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997). However, in *The Edge of Words* (p. 137), Williams writes that 'there is...a dimension of fictional narrative which imagines possibilities of positive change that our 'normal perceptions routinely encourage us to ignore, hope that cannot simply be brought out of the simply given. If ultimate convergence, healing, consolation, is apparently impossible to imagine, that's why it is necessary to imagine it. Or, to avoid merely annoying paradox: if we cannot rationally predict or organize or guarantee some sort of reconciliation and healing, we have no choice but to approach it through fiction – not as a means of evading or denying an unpalatable present but as a form of acknowledging resources that are there in or for our present world, but to which we do not yet have straightforward access.'

¹⁰²² See the two interpretive essays in Robert Emmett Meagher, *Herakles Gone Mad: Rethinking Heroism in an Age of Endless War* (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2006), 3-67. Such has some surprising connections with Aristotle's own reflections in this regard (cf. *Poetics* 1453b1-11).

never defined by individuals alone, but in conjunction with the wider context in which it is placed. This means that the self-identity of any item or person can only be maintained through difference, through a non-identical repetition within time. Such impresses, in contemporary terms, the intuition (that has been suggested since Aristotle) of a perennial interplay between the particular and universal. For his part, Williams's own register leans more on Hegel's historicism, and specifically focuses on the way Hegel sought to overcome the dichotomies between sameness and difference. This rejection of dualism, that is, between particular and its abstraction, between the transcendent and the immanent, gives credence to the analogical metaphysic we have been stressing throughout, namely, that there is an intimate – albeit infinite qualitative distinction – between the *being-there* and the *being-thus* (to use Przywara's lexicon), between temporal being and Being-as-such. In order to think particulars then, we have to place them within the context of their unfolding, which stretches into the infinite.

The same can be said in regard to selfhood: we cannot think of ourselves apart from the regimes of language and community, and especially, for Augustine, in the way that we are related desirously to God in an unending pilgrimage. We exist as embodied and temporal beings, and therefore we cannot come to a self-understanding apart from embracing our limited existence, our sense of createdness. Again, as in the case of language, our material bodies have a significance that is not simply imposed arbitrarily, but is something that is discovered as gift, as something received in trust. This means that the self does not have to assert itself at all costs, or hang onto strict identities for the sake of survival. For Williams, one of the elements of our moral pilgrimage is that we learn to let go of identities that hinder expansion. Such dilation might imply loss, but precisely because this forfeiture can be spoken and historically communicated, we cannot foreclose the meaning such loss might accrue. And because matter matters, we should not assume prematurely that 'meaning' is a product of self-deception or fantasy. Certainly, 'meaning' can be credulous or delusory, but that is something which can only be tested relationally, through the way that narratives display their 'adequacy to reality' (Walter Stein). Through reflections on narratives of loss, and in having the courage to speak them, we may chance upon disclosures which we did not expect. We might encounter another self on the other side of death.

But because the self exists within relations, this also implies a political order that does not privilege atomized individuals or privatized goods. To say that I discover myself in another is to imply that I am not defined in opposition to other agents. If I can know or recognize myself in someone different, this means that I am not a self-constituting subject, but rather am re-discovered in the other. But if this is the case, then it means that my interests are not exclusively mine alone, but are found within the encounters and negotiations I have with others. And this suggests that what is good for my well-being does not have to come at the

expense of others, in the sense that their goods are opposed to mine. The alternative option, which assumes that my good is opposed to yours, would seem to be predicated on an inherently conflictive account of bilateral exclusion – an ontology of violence that fates us to a lugubrious social compact. This is the conclusion that follows if we think of the Good as being purely contingent or hopelessly pluralistic. It is this metaphysic that underlies the Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*, and the liberal order that denies a deeper commonality beyond sectional interests. The alternative to this picture is the assumption that the Good is transcendent and universal, and finally convertible with infinite Being-as-such. The Good cannot be grasped in its plenitude within time, but only slowly and progressively inched towards– with plenty of setbacks and misconceptions along the way. But to say that the Good is historically mediated *for us* does not mean that the Good is a product of history itself. To assume this would reduce the Good to a purely immanent site of production, without any ontological ground for intersectional interest. Such a vision, if true, would mean that I could not engage with others on the assumption that we might recognize a common good; rather, it presupposes an endless rivalry and exclusionary politics.

In a text entitled ‘Resurrection and Peace’,¹⁰²³ Williams speaks about the ‘error’ of seeing ‘the reality and inevitability of conflict’ as a ‘kind of metaphysical statement about the inevitability of mutual exclusion and strife’. Instead, we should trace them to ‘the ways in which we are formed in the hard tasks of responding to resistance [and] the otherness of the world’, in ‘the accepting of our inability to guarantee ourselves or anyone an untroubled passage through it’.¹⁰²⁴ It is into these tensions that we are placed: neither pessimism nor optimism, but a sober acknowledgement of where we are at, how we got here, and how this might assist us in imagining alternate futures.

¹⁰²³ *On Christian Theology*, 265-275.

¹⁰²⁴ ‘Resurrection and Peace,’ 273.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

Our study has focused on a single question: can a classical account of transcendence reckon with ‘the tragic’? And if so, how might it do this? Behind this question was the assumption (as suggested in Chapter 3) that the regime of ‘the tragic’, especially within the modern period, carried residual imports that a classically-orthodox theology would struggle to accept. I did not suggest these were the *only* problems, but that they were some of the most pressing for a traditional metaphysic. In other words, I was not so much focused on the relation between Christianity and the tragic *in general*. I was not *primarily* concerned whether other varieties of Christian thought and practice would have greater (or less) ease in appropriating *the negativity of the tragic*. Though I certainly think that a classical theology has something important to say, I do not presume it provides the only viable Christian response to the tragic. Instead my intention was narrower, insofar as I have been trying throughout to ask whether there are specific grammars of transcendence – especially within their contemporary reception– that hinder a more ‘systematic’ correlation between orthodox Christianity and ‘tragedy’. Are there ways of construing transcendence which alleviate this juxtaposition, or are we resigned to opposition?

In Chapter 1 we gave an outline of our argument and the theological method we would be adopting for this study. In Chapter 2, we situated our discussion of ‘tragedy’ within the debate between the poets and philosophers, with a concentration on the writings of Plato. Our goal here was to find out where some of these tensions might have begun, that is, between ancient philosophical metaphysics and the tragic. We noticed that the Platonic rejection of theatre was ambiguous, and therefore could not be decisive for the contemporary debate. We subsequently moved on to the interconnections between Christianity and the tragic, there once more emphasizing its more traditional incarnations within the patristic and medieval periods. Here we encountered a significant diversity of responses, which were difficult to schematize into a single strategy. There was a suspicion of the genre and its broader thematic within influential quarters (e.g. Tertullian and Augustine), but an acceptance and deployment of its structures by others. What this means is that we cannot assume a permanent antagonism between Christianity and the tragic *as such*, and therefore should not situate the conceptual abrasiveness at this point at least. Instead, we suggested that the supposed tension between Christianity and the tragic was a more recent phenomenon, and had more to do with a specific generalization of the tragic and Christianity *in toto*. Thereafter, we introduced the figures of David Bentley Hart, Donald MacKinnon, John Milbank, and Rowan Williams as modern theologians who were representative within this debate. Within Chapter 3, in anticipation of

the importance of the theme of divine transcendence for this debate, we sketched this teaching with the assistance of John Webster and Rowan Williams. Thereafter, we laid out the connections between transcendence and the tragic, and moreover, how this relation was reconfigured in modernity. This was done specifically in relation to *the modern regime of the sublime, the idea of a suffering Absolute, and the rejection of evil-as-privation*, developments which ultimately have created tensions for a classical reading of transcendence, specifically as regards *analogy, aseity and the ontological priority of the Good*.

In Chapter 4, we introduced Donald MacKinnon more substantially, before engaging in a detailed reading of his critics, namely Hart and Milbank. It was argued by Hart that MacKinnon's adoption of tragedy implicated him in a sacrificial totalitarianism that was unable to account for the irruption of the resurrection gospel. Hart also castigated 'tragic theology' as being entwined with a rejection of divine impassibility and evil-as-privation, and therefore remained problematic for an orthodox theology. Milbank for his part argued that MacKinnon's use of the tragic was interlaced with an acceptance of the Kantian sublime, and a failure to appreciate an analogical metaphysics as providing an avenue for reconciling transcendence and historicity.

In Chapters 5 and 6, we entered into a detailed reading of MacKinnon, with the aim of seeing whether these critiques hit their mark. Our answer was a qualified yes with some dissensions. Chapter 5 argued, through an examination of his reception of Aristotelian philosophy, atomist realism and Kantian metaphysics, that MacKinnon was unable to conceptually account for the interrelation between historicity, constructionism and transcendence. We suggested that this was connected to his rejection of analogical participation, a decision based upon his suspicion of Platonic 'intellectual intuition', and also his Kantian rejection of the idea that 'being is a predicate' of particular things.

The following chapter turned to his account of ethics, metaphysics and the tragic. Here we discussed MacKinnon's desire to construct a 'system of projection' that deduced transcendence through a focus on moral perplexity and the tragic. MacKinnon's argumentation supposed that these realities required something more than a purely immanent description could give, because without this transcendent supplementation, these realities would be rendered trivial, and therefore the tragic would cease to be about anything truly difficult. Biological naturalism displaces metaphysics, and with it tragedy ceases to be a problem. However, we nonetheless suggested, as a result of his acceptance of Kantian transcendentalism and 'radical evil', that he remained captured within the modern regime of sublimity, insofar as he lacked a coherent model of projection regarding the relation of created finitude to infinite beatitude. Insofar as he rejected the *privatio boni*, and accepted divine passibility and a noumenal sublime, he rendered indeterminate the quality of 'the unconditioned'. Therefore, it remained difficult for him to establish an intimate connection

between the realm of nature and the realm of ends, between nature and its transcendent good, and therefore escape the critiques of Milbank. We did *not* argue that this was his explicit intention, but rather that it was an implication of his conceptual instability. However, we did suggest that Hart's comments regarding sacrificial totality could not be applied to the substance of MacKinnon's thought. Moreover, Milbank's accusations that the 'speculative closure' of the tragic avoids historicity, while having some validity, did not address everything that needed to be said regarding MacKinnon vis-à-vis tragedy. We also argued that Milbank's own approach, at points, might not be historicist enough.

It was the intention of Chapters 7 and 8 to provide a critical supplementation to MacKinnon's insights through an intensive reading of Rowan Williams. This was done with the aim of showing that a classical account of transcendent goodness can be coherently related to the negativity of the tragic. In view of the previous argumentation, Williams's contribution would need to traverse the conceptual problems which we associated with MacKinnon's approach. It would need to espouse an orthodox metaphysic of the creator-creature relation, via the doctrines of aseity and analogy, and would also have to address questions of historicity. This question was partly addressed in Chapter 3 already, but this chapter sought to develop those reflections more as they occurred in his other writings. Also, his position would need to advance an account of the *privatio boni* that was able to endure the critiques lodged at it by MacKinnon and others, and would moreover have to transcend the Kantian and postmodern sublime. We suggested that Williams meets these requirements: we examined his metaphysical writings to show that he was able to bring-together a traditional account of analogical transcendence within a modernist and Romantic theory of poetics. This was seen in his various writings on *creativity*, *language* and *analogy*, insofar as it attempted to reconcile a metaphysical realism with a robust historicity. Thereafter we discussed Williams's interpretation of Augustine as regards the question of evil, and its deep interconnection with his idea of God as transcendent goodness. We saw him argue that the rejection of evil-as-privation is a by-no-means trivial choice, and has implications as regards our conceptualizations of metaphysics, politics and ethics. If the Good is not convertible with the transcendent and infinite One, and not anterior to any ontological perversion, then evil is rendered transcendental, and our respective 'goods' can no longer be implemented on the assumption that they are reconcilable within the higher order of the Good. Both of these outgrowths tacitly imply either an *ontological violence* or *ontological pessimism* – neither of which gives us much assistance with regard to a truly emancipatory politics.

Chapter 8 provided a capstone to the dissertation, as far as it sought to exposit Williams's *The Tragic Imagination*, a monograph which constitutes his most significant testament on the question of tragedy. In a comparable manner to our discussion of MacKinnon, we prefaced our take on Williams with a discussion of 'difficulty' and its relation to moral maturation. We

then moved to a discussion of his reception of Augustinian concepts of selfhood through Hegel and Gillian Rose. It was argued that Williams's appropriation of the self proposes a kenotic restatement of the Augustinian path, specifically as this connects to the displacement of the ego through desire and the unhanding of self. We could say that this is the 'tragic' aspect of his reading. However, Williams's predilection for rupture and dispossession is complemented by a Hegelian 'comic' iteration in which human failure and error was bracketed by laughter. Moral growth is not about self-laceration or simply ego-bashing, but about a letting-go of those assertions that restrict and distort – in other words, those identities that are taken *too* seriously. After that, we turned to *The Tragic Imagination*, placing its content within the background that led up to it. In this part, we argued that Williams's approach was centered on the claim that 'the tragic' characterized events that could be carried in *language*: they are communicable and subject to relational engagement between agents. Pain is not locked within a silent abjection of the sublime, but incorporated into narratives, stories that can be re-told, engaged and enlarged. Therefore, tragic suffering does not mean we are isolated into any transcendental restrictions of unthinkability or unspeakability, as if we could not imagine *that* pain within a larger story, or that we could not think about *how* and *why* certain tragic errors might have arisen in the past, or that any sense-making is *a priori* excluded. Rather, it is to say that we never quite know whether *this* word will be the *last* word. This insight brings us to the next major theme, namely the problem of *irony*. It says that history places indeterminacy over actions, which (because they happen within a finite causal nexus) can irrupt into conflict and suffering; to exist within time means that we never quite know the outcomes of our decisions and actions, or whether these outgrowths are final or not. History has a way of overturning expectations, for better or for worse. The import of tragic experience is that we can never quite know what this outcome will be. And one could say that this is intrinsic to what we have been calling *the negativity of the tragic*.

Reflecting on these last chapters, it is worth remarking upon some ways in which Williams sustains this negativity, because they are not always spelled out in detail within *The Tragic Imagination* and the other texts we have discussed. One of the first things to mention is that Williams's acceptance of the *privatio boni* means not only that the Good is granted priority, but also that evil has *no meaning in itself*. If this is the case, then it resists *any* theodicy that presupposes that we can ascribe depth or order to evil. Such is excluded at the outset by the Platonic-Augustinian perspective. On this reading, evil does not have any 'being', nor is it a distinct 'thing' within the world, nor does it have any persistence apart from the reality it corrupts. Evil is devoid of rationality: it is the black hole of meaning, a gaping maw of

nothingness.¹⁰²⁵ What this means is while we cannot equate *all* suffering with evil, it certainly means that we cannot ascribe meaning to suffering *as such*. Williams's criticisms elsewhere of philosophical theodicies as 'an attempt to forget [suffering] as suffering' and therefore as entwined with 'untruthfulness'¹⁰²⁶ remain in force, as does his rejection of more subtle approaches to this question (e.g. Marilyn McCord Adams).¹⁰²⁷ However, this necessary qualification does not exclude the possibility that human beings are able to create meaning *within* suffering. Williams's major contribution to our discussion is that tragic experience is not excluded from communication, which means that suffering can be narrated in such a way that it is included (potentially) within a larger scope of meaning. We cannot predetermine the scope this or that event will generate, and the context into which it will be ultimately placed. Because of this, we do well to hold onto a healthy dose of irony, in the knowledge that it is possible that 'there are unpredictable, unsystematisable integrations of suffering into a biography in the experience of some',¹⁰²⁸ while for others this may be lacking. This aspect of narrative touches upon one of the other ways Williams attempts to incorporate tragic loss within his system: one can recall here how he criticized Milbank regarding the question of 'resolution' within narrative, and whether Milbank himself could be accused of an account that was implicated in 'an *unmaking* of the past', one that conjectured 'an exit from the world of narrative', and 'an absolute ending which obliterates the cost of what has gone before'.¹⁰²⁹

One conclusion to be drawn from this is that Williams's attachment to the negativity of the tragic cautions him against any eschatological cancellation of the tragic. Our gospels appear to confirm this: *Christ's wounds are not erased but raised with him* (John 20.24-29). The resurrection does not obliterate human history but redeems it. This is a continuing motif within Williams's oeuvre ever since his lectures on Eliot's *Four Quartets*. For Williams, as Benjamin Myers says, 'Whatever Christian eschatology might mean, it cannot posit any final triumph over human imperfection and limitation. To eliminate tragedy would be to do away

¹⁰²⁵ To quote Milbank: 'evil for the Christian tradition was radically without cause – indeed it was not even self-caused, but was rather the (impossible) refusal of cause. In this way privation theory offers not an 'explanation' of evil, but instead rigorously remains with its inexplicability, for 'explanation' can pertain only to existence, and here evil is not seen as something in existence. Indeed it is regarded for this reason as not even explicable *in principle*, not even explicable for God. Since evil is in this way so problematic that it falls outside the range of *problema*, there has never been for theologians any 'problem of evil'. The idea that there is such a problem has only arisen since, roughly, the time of Leibniz. As inherited evil was held to have already impaired our finitude, there was, indeed, for the authentic tradition, in us a causal bias to evil; yet since grace renews our will, our evil decision to refuse grace is as groundless and causeless as Adam's original sin' (Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 18). Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology,' in *On Christian Theology*, 155.

¹⁰²⁷ Williams, 'Redeeming Sorrows: Marilyn McCord Adams and the Defeat of Evil,' in Mike Higton (ed.), *Wrestling with Angels*, 255-274. Her own project is summarised in Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca – New York: Cornell University Press, 1999).

¹⁰²⁸ 'Redeeming Sorrows: Marilyn McCord Adams and the Defeat of Evil,' 272.

¹⁰²⁹ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 114-115.

with the difference that makes us human'.¹⁰³⁰ Moreover, 'Christian hope does not invalidate [a] tragic vision, but reaffirms it – just as Christ's resurrection does not cancel out the crucifixion, but transfigures it and discloses its inner significance'.¹⁰³¹ This eschatological vision is able to sustain MacKinnon's phraseology of 'the transcendence of the tragic' insofar as it does not attempt 'to eliminate the element of unfathomable mystery by the attempt to move beyond tragedy',¹⁰³² nor does it deny what Paul Janz called 'the finality of non-resolution'.¹⁰³³ This does not negate what Brett Gray has said, namely that Williams's eschatology has 'an almost eudaemonic register',¹⁰³⁴ that proposes a final 'amelioration of the tragic' within its scope.¹⁰³⁵ But it does mean that redemption does not necessitate the erasure of any past, but rather implies its transformation.

Another thing needs to be remarked upon before we transition to some critical commentary on Williams's work. One of the running strains throughout this work is the impact of the Kantian sublime on the reception of the tragic. We saw this already in Chapter 3 and it has persisted throughout this study, as seen in the debate between Milbank and MacKinnon in Chapters 4-6. However, it should be said that Williams (except for a rather brief reference) scarcely addresses this trope explicitly within *The Tragic Imagination*, or in his other writings for that matter, nor does he engage much with MacKinnon's Kantianism— at least in this work¹⁰³⁶ – and how it featured prominently within Milbank's critique of MacKinnon. It is this paucity that has inspired my own study. So in the previous argument, I have suggested that Williams's metaphysics is incompatible with a Kantian transcendentalism or an abstract negativity of postmodernity. Williams's questions anti-representationalism, or any wager that privileges an ontological excess which remains absolutely non-thinkable and unspeakable, one entrenched within the 'pathos of perpetual negation'.¹⁰³⁷ Moreover, his proposal that 'suffering can be narrated', 'communicatively or imaginatively shared' and therefore made into 'a cultural fact',¹⁰³⁸ implicitly counter-acts a tragic sublimity that would baptize silence as being the *only* response to traumatic anguish. Such is seen in his interactions with George Steiner, but within the space of his monograph these connections are not unfurled as much as they could have been. This is not a negligible point, since (as we already indicated in earlier chapters) the post-Kantian sublime has had a seminal impact on continental readings of the tragic, running from Schiller, through Nietzsche, up until postmodernity. Our own study has

¹⁰³⁰ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 56.

¹⁰³¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁰³² MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics*, 129.

¹⁰³³ Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, 175.

¹⁰³⁴ Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams*, 127.

¹⁰³⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁰³⁶ However, see Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology' for some supplements on this point.

¹⁰³⁷ Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics,' 69.

¹⁰³⁸ *The Tragic Imagination*, 132.

been written within this background, suggesting that Williams contributes a particular lucidity to the debate around the modern sublime, even though he does not explicitly address it in those terms.

That being said, Williams's account is not immune to critique or opacity. David Bentley Hart, in his response to *The Tragic Imagination*, remains largely unrepentant – despite Williams's countervailing. Hart complains about how Williams's Hegelian reading of tragedy proposes 'an unhistorical imposition of post-Christian notions on a society to which they are irrelevant'.¹⁰³⁹ Hart repeats his previous critiques that tragedy 'beautifies' suffering,¹⁰⁴⁰ and narcotizes us into submission, implying that 'all these terrible truths could somehow, by the application of sufficient art, be made beautiful, hypnotic, gorgeously grave, and stupefying'.¹⁰⁴¹ In his lapidary remark, he argues that rather than instigating critical reflection, 'the infallible mark of the tragic is that it helps one sleep well'.¹⁰⁴² Here Hart is echoing his earlier contention that 'tragedy' does not provoke a clear-eyed wisdom regarding the nature of reality, but rather consoles us into inaction. He qualifies perceptions of his previous work (e.g. *The Beauty of the Infinite*) by saying that his problem with tragedy is not that it proposes a 'pessimistic' outlook, but that 'it is not yet terrible enough to account for what the gospel brings into human reflection'.¹⁰⁴³ For Hart, tragedy does not diagnose the depth of our alienation and loss, nor does it provide remedy. On the contrary, it is only the 'logic' of resurrection faith, with its 'mad and quite imprudent vision of divine truth', which establishes that 'the only horizon of hope is that of the humanly impossible'. In his estimate, Christianity is more child-like in its hope, having greater affinity to fairy-tales than the tragic.¹⁰⁴⁴ Moreover, Hart assumes within these interventions the idea that a narrative-dramatic representation of pain as a mode of 'healing without cure', however beneficial, is not yet the gospel.

Williams concedes that the eschatological dimension of Christianity says that 'happy endings' are not earned by the logic of a narrative, nor do they cancel what has happened in the story so far', but have 'the nature of a startling novelty, a gratuitous plot-twist'.¹⁰⁴⁵ For Hart and Williams, the resurrection does not succeed the crucifixion like a simple alteration in the *mise-en-scène*. The gospel is more radical and apocalyptic than that. Nevertheless, Williams does write that

¹⁰³⁹ David Bentley Hart, 'The Gospel According to Melpomene: Reflections on Rowan Williams's *The Tragic Imagination*'. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018), 223. For his critique of Hegel (and Williams's) reading of *Antigone*, see *ibid.*, 228-229.

¹⁰⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁰⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁰⁴² *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁰⁴³ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁰⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Rowan Williams, 'Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed': A Response to Comments on *The Tragic Imagination*. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018), 280.

The discourse, the imaginative labour, which we call ‘tragic’ is an act of faith that what in its intensity of pain or emptiness defies language may not after all be a final victory for chaos. Perhaps it is not inappropriate to say that in this sense tragic representation is *analogous* to theological proclamation. It states that something remains possible in the wake of atrocity. And how to make such a statement without doing less than justice to the weight of what has been seen or felt is precisely what makes this kind of discourse difficult and laden with ambiguities and possible failures.¹⁰⁴⁶

In addition to this qualification, one could advance several other points of reply: firstly, Hart once more displays a rather entrenched concept of Attic tragedy that is advanced without any references to contemporary classical scholarship (e.g. Vernant, Goldhill, etc.), even as he accuses Williams of ‘a literary interpretation’ of tragedy, a ‘treatment principally of texts, abstracted from the historically concrete realities of both the aesthetic form and the religious context of the plays’.¹⁰⁴⁷ Williams remains perturbed by this: he is worried by ‘a continuing essentialism’ within Hart’s critique, and argues that if Hart’s characterizations of tragic art are serious, then ‘my disagreement is fundamental (to a degree that surprises me)’. While Hart ‘appears to reduce tragic representation to a stratagem to *avoid* seeing’, Williams makes the opposing argument ‘that it is one of those disciplines that *enables* some kinds of seeing’.¹⁰⁴⁸ The contradiction could not be clearer than this. Secondly, Hart makes some rather confusing remarks regarding ‘beauty’ which stand in contrast to some of his earlier proposals. There are moments in Hart’s text¹⁰⁴⁹ where he appears to suggest that “‘beauty’ is automatically elided with a manifest form that veils rather than reveals’, which appears to contradict his earlier contentions that ‘the beauty embodied in the form of what we actually see or hear or touch is precisely its aptness to the truth, not an embellishment’.¹⁰⁵⁰ What Williams is suggesting is that Hart rather strangely appears to succumb, at moments, to a quasi-Kantian sublimity that proposes the negligibility of form to the communication of the beautiful. This is despite his metaphysical conceits expressed elsewhere, in *The Beauty of the Infinite*, that the triune God is the coincidence of both infinite beauty and perfect form. These apparent tensions would need to be addressed by Hart, who seems to have muddled things a bit in this particular response. Thirdly, one could query Hart’s *prima facie* dualism between ‘the tragic’ and ‘the fairy-tale’, inasmuch as fairy-tales – especially in their earlier recordings – often resist the

¹⁰⁴⁶ Ibid., 280-281.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Hart, ‘The Gospel According to Melpomene,’ 223.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Williams, ‘“Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed”,’ 281.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Hart, ‘The Gospel According to Melpomene,’ 221, 222, 225.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Williams, ‘“Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed”,’ 281-282.

simplistic resolutions found within their expurgated versions. Fairy-tales can display a moral complexity and tragic irresolution that renders fast distinctions liable to deconstruction.¹⁰⁵¹ One only has to see, for example, Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) or Matteo Garrone's *Tale of Tales* (2015) to notice that such divisions are not absolute. Also important to recognize is that some tragedies themselves have been compared to the structures of fairy-tales (like Euripides's *Alcestis*).¹⁰⁵² Hart *might* respond that these samples are not really tragedies, but then we are back at Steinerian essentialism. So in relation to Hart and the tragic, it appears that not much has changed.

Graham Ward has also penned a largely appreciative critique of Williams's book.¹⁰⁵³ His responses are centered on the question of liminality, on the thresholds between the human and non-human. Ward's recent excursions into evolutionary psychology most certainly occupy a hinterland, as seen in the way that he shows how the tragedians themselves toyed with the interplay between the human and non-human in their imagery. The central thread of this text is that 'the tragic' touches upon something deeper, more traumatic, than intellectual resources can capacitate. He worries that Williams rushes too quickly towards 'eloquence'.¹⁰⁵⁴ Ward desires to linger, to tarry with the negative. Or to use Lacanian terminology, he wants to more greatly emphasize the traumatic Real vis-à-vis the Symbolic. For Ward, 'the tragic' or traumatic reaches towards the animality we share with the non-human, exposing us to the threat of a 'nothing' (as in *King Lear*) that is 'ontological, even meontological', and 'not epistemological'.¹⁰⁵⁵ Ward's language here projects tragic risk onto a cosmological landscape, a risk he takes, despite refusing the fatalisms of 'absolute tragedy'.

Williams takes on Ward's concern insofar as 'to observe that tragedy is always already something *said* is not to flatten it into a matter of verbal bromide and quick consolation. It isn't so much that a tragic drama wins through to a conclusion that is thinkable and therefore consolatory in some illegitimate way'. In his perspective, the 'imagination' is always-already implicated in representation, so that we should be weary of proposing a traumatic Real that is non-representable (in the manner of postmodern theorists like Lyotard and Nancy).¹⁰⁵⁶ In reference to Walter Davis's concept of the 'crypt', Williams acknowledges that 'internal chaos' is 'the raw substance of any tragic imagining', and moreover that 'the roots of outrageous pain and atrocity in a damaged cosmic order should indeed be drawn into any

¹⁰⁵¹ Cf. Rowan Williams, "No more Happy Endings: Why we Need Fairy Tales now More Than Ever". *New Statesman* (19 December–8 January 2015): 90–92.

¹⁰⁵² Anne Pippin Burnett, *Catastrophe Survived: Euripides' Plays of Mixed Reversal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 22–46.

¹⁰⁵³ Graham Ward, 'Extremities'. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018): 235–242.

¹⁰⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁰⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Williams, 'Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed', 282.

thinking about tragedy'.¹⁰⁵⁷ But he is worried that Ward's de-centering of humanity within the tragic imagination is not pellucid enough: how does one speak of the cosmically tragic without advancing the 'absolute tragedy' or the 'ontological violence' he clearly desires to traverse? Additionally, Ward opens himself to the misinterpretation of relativizing human agony within a cosmological and evolutionary glance – which is certainly not his intention. Williams thinks, on the contrary, that 'to speak about trauma is to speak from *where we actually are*; never mind the black holes and the deep evolutionary history'.¹⁰⁵⁸ There is also the not uncontroversial suggestion, given by Ward, that the 'nothing' of *King Lear* and the *creatio ex nihilo* are identified *ex profundis* – a move that has affinities to a Derridean *khora* (à la Plato's *Timaeus*).¹⁰⁵⁹ But this begs the question – which I am sure Williams would want to ask – as to where the radical *goodness* of creation comes in within this schema. One could also ask how the moral indeterminacy of the *nihil* plays out within Ward's larger theology of creation, questions that might require further nuance in the future.¹⁰⁶⁰

Nevertheless, Ward's critique of 'eloquence' is well-taken: his interventions have been echoed by trauma theorists and metaphysicians such as William Desmond.¹⁰⁶¹ Cathy Caruth argues that traumatic occurrences fall into a category that resists comprehension within normal symbolic registers, as so far as trauma disrupts the relative homeostasis we habituate. As such, precisely because it is unexpected and comes without warning, trauma comes too 'early' for the mind to conceptualize and resists simplistic incorporation into what Bessel Van der Kolk calls 'implicit' memory'.¹⁰⁶² William Desmond also theorizes that 'the tragic' reveals our 'being at a loss', a particularity of suffering that is manifest in "the Once' or 'the Howl' (*King Lear* is again the reference here). These experiences demand attention, and problematize any cozy metaphysics. However, we should register the ambiguity of trauma too, more than Ward himself does in this admittedly short text. Desmond admits there is 'no geometry of the tragic'¹⁰⁶³ – in a swipe against the Spinozist perspective that would cancel the tragic within a mirror of eternity. But Desmond also proposes a concept of 'the posthumous mind', which imagines trauma as a 'thinking of being as if from beyond death,

¹⁰⁵⁷ Ibid., 282-283.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Ibid., 283.

¹⁰⁵⁹ For an exposition and deployment of this train of argument, see John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 55-83.

¹⁰⁶⁰ He does speak of the Fall as a non-historical event, as a 'back-projection of a loss and alienation we don't know how to account for' (Ward, 'Extremities,' 240). Moreover, I also take his reference to the Fall as being 'not historical', that is, as recordable or chartable as an historical event insofar as 'we conceive spacetime along quantum lines', as meaning that the experience of tragic loss does begin within temporality, even though it certainly predates our own evolutionary history.

¹⁰⁶¹ William Desmond, 'Being at a Loss: Reflections on Philosophy and the Tragic,' in N. Georgopoulos (ed.), *Tragedy and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 154-186.

¹⁰⁶² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), 57-72; Bessel A. Van Der Kolk 'Trauma and Memory'. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 52 (1998): 97-109.

¹⁰⁶³ Desmond, 'Being at a Loss,' 168.

being in the worthiness of present joy’ of a ‘Tragic insight [which] crosses over from life to death, and looks back on life, crosses back and lives life otherwise’.¹⁰⁶⁴ On this reading, tragic events, and their post-traumatic narration,¹⁰⁶⁵ exhibit an openness which cannot simply be predetermined.¹⁰⁶⁶ Traumas are radically life-altering events, for better or worse, and it is this that makes it ambiguous and liminal. For those who have gone through traumatic experiences, the intermingling of ‘death’ and ‘life’ involves the problem of ‘survival’, a living after ‘death’ – an ambiguous ‘middle’, to reference Shelly Rambo.¹⁰⁶⁷ To quote Kirby Farrell: ‘trauma destabilizes the ground of experience, and therefore is always supercharged with significance and always profoundly equivocal in its interpretative possibilities. Like a traditional religious conversion experience, it can signify rebirth and promise transcendence, or it can open into an abyss’.¹⁰⁶⁸ One could also reference Jacques Lacan (again in deference to Ward’s text) when he says that ‘when the traumatic elements – grounded in an image which has never been integrated – draw near...holes, points of fracture appear in the unification, the synthesis, of the subject’s history.’ But he goes on to say ‘how it is in starting from these holes that the subject can realign himself [sic] within the different symbolic determinations which make him a subject with a history’.¹⁰⁶⁹ In light of these comments, the re-alignment of the subject within language should certainly not be glossed over or treated as negligible; and so Ward’s criticisms of ‘eloquence’ should not undermine the importance of narrative integration. The stakes are just too high.¹⁰⁷⁰ However, his concern about proceeding too quickly towards epistemological categories is important.

Terry Eagleton’s comments about the book are addressed within a more political vein: he wonders whether ‘to regard tragedy from Aeschylus to Arthur Miller as being essentially concerned with a recognition of otherness is to project a modern (even, one might add, fashionable) liberal motif into spuriously universal terms’.¹⁰⁷¹ He opines that ‘Williams is a

¹⁰⁶⁴ Ibid., 183.

¹⁰⁶⁵ On this, see Jodie Wigren, ‘Narrative Completion in the Treatment of Trauma’. *Psychotherapy* 31.3 (1994): 415-423; Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Dori Laub, ‘From Speechlessness to Narrative: The Cases of Holocaust Historians and of Psychiatrically Hospitalized Survivors.’ *Literature and Medicine* 24.2 (2005): 253-265.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Cathy Caruth has said that ‘speaking and listening *from the site of trauma*...does not rely...on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don’t yet know of our own traumatic pasts,’ in Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1995), 11.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Shelly Rambo, ‘Spirit and Trauma’. *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 69.1 (2015): 7-19.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Kirby Farrell, *Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation* (Baltimore and London, John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 18.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 1: Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, (ed.) Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York-London: W.W. Norton, 1991), 197.

¹⁰⁷⁰ See Thomas Fuchs, ‘Fragmented Selves: Temporality and Identity in Borderline Personality Disorder’. *Psychopathology* 40 (2007): 379-387; Fuchs, ‘Existential Vulnerability: Toward a Psychopathology of Limit Situations’. *Psychopathology* 46 (2013): 301-308.

¹⁰⁷¹ Terry Eagleton, ‘Tragedy and Liberalism’. *Modern Theology* 34.2 (2018), 254.

man of profound convictions who like many a liberal is rather wary of conviction', since it is 'too close for comfort to the zealous and doctrinaire'. Here Eagleton disagrees: on the one side, 'Not all certainties... are dangerously narrowing. On the contrary, there are assured truths that can be liberating'. On the other side, 'Being exploratory, self-questioning and open-ended about the latter fact is to put yourself on the wrong side', at least in some circumstances'.¹⁰⁷² These critiques appear to center on the question of commitment, or lack thereof, and the degree to which Williams's tragic mindset tends to baptize an overly-hesitant approach to political action (a point echoed by Milbank¹⁰⁷³). Such is related to Eagleton's suspicions of Williams's Hegelian dramatic criticism, especially as regards the *Antigone*.¹⁰⁷⁴ As Eagleton says,

the solution to tragic conflict is not some Arnoldian flexibility of mind. You can be as pliable and unself-deceived as you like, as open to otherness and difference as the most dedicated Derridean, and still get it in the neck. Williams is too quick to endorse the Hegelian case that tragedy springs from the collision of two equally justified but lopsided positions.¹⁰⁷⁵

But Williams is not convinced by this critique (which seems to echo Hart's).¹⁰⁷⁶ While he is fully aware that 'it will not do to suspend action in order to honour moral complexity', and is generally persuaded by Eagleton's comments regarding the importance of commitments, he still thinks that Eagleton has not recognized the nuance of his position. He emphasized (along with MacKinnon) that 'the need for action does not guarantee absolution'. Additionally, 'There is indeed nothing much to be said for a view that simply identifies the virtues of contending positions and shrugs its shoulders or wrings its hands over the difficulty'. But he does qualify this, since 'to say there is a serious case to be made for two contending positions

¹⁰⁷² Ibid., 255.

¹⁰⁷³ See John Milbank, 'The Archbishop of Canterbury: The Man and the Theology Behind the Shari'a Lecture,' in Rex J. Adhar and Nicholas Aroney (eds.), *Shari'a in the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 50-53.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Eagleton, 'Tragedy and Liberalism,' 256.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Ibid., 256.

¹⁰⁷⁶ In relation to this, and Hart criticisms of Williams's Hegelian reading, Williams gives three responses: 'First, the conflict in the play is not about 'family' versus 'state': it is, as I argued, about two kinds of sacred solidarity, with immensely serious claims, and it is something of a shortcut to conclude that Antigone has to die so that the polis is conserved. The disaster that overtakes Creon is clearly to do with the offence that he offers to the solidarity of the dead; it is *not* that his version of sacralty triumphs. Second, this does rather reinforce Simon Goldhill's point about how Attic tragedy reminds its audience that the polis is more fragile than they would like to believe, and that its continuing coherence depends on the intensely difficult, near-impossible attempt to do justice to a diversity of sacral claims. But thirdly, to recognise that doing such justice is difficult and fraught with the possibility of blasphemous offence should not imply that we are immobilized, only that we must act with fuller awareness than we might otherwise do of the risks attending our acts' ('Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed', 284-285).

is not the same as saying that there is no informed choice to be made between them'. As he has stressed, 'what the tragic imagination insists upon is the recognition that even a choice believed and undertaken in thoughtful, responsible moral conviction may carry a cost for the agent and the agent's world. Recognizing this should not paralyse, but it should inform'.¹⁰⁷⁷ MacKinnon would agree. So it is not that a tragic perspective condones perpetual hesitancy or refrainment from action, but that we count the *cost* of our actions, with the realization that even good intentions can occasion unpredictable outcomes. Our awareness of this should not morally debilitate us, but rather chasten our resolve.

To conclude this dissertation on the note of 'action' is probably not inappropriate. If anything our plea for a non-contingent goodness and oneness, which we can gesture towards but never grasp, might lay the ground for an ethic that is at once hopeful but not hubristic. It wagers a foundation for a politics that acknowledges the persistence of conflict, but denies that this is necessary, that my goods are at their depth opposed to yours. Moreover, it says that if the Good is primordial, then this supports that basic trust required for transformative action, so that we may let-go and thereby 'clear a space for the new', for a hope that 'even in these desolate conditions you can't give up on your faith or love, however little it can be realized or rewarded'. And it is precisely this conviction that might 'just transform [a] barrier into a horizon'.¹⁰⁷⁸ Or to adapt a phrase taken from Paul Ricoeur, it may stimulate the affirmation of 'the Joy of Yes in the sadness of the finite'.¹⁰⁷⁹ Or as Wallace Stevens once suggested:

...How cold the vacancy
When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist
First sees reality. The mortal no
Has its emptiness and tragic expirations.
The tragedy, however, may have begun,
Again, in the imagination's new beginning,
In the yes of the realist spoken because he must
Say yes, spoken because under every no
Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken.¹⁰⁸⁰

If tragedy, as Rowan Williams says, is conceived as an event of 'the particular, the narratively specific, out of which certain kinds of new language grow',¹⁰⁸¹ and, moreover, constitutes a 'protest against a polity and culture that lure us to sink our truthful perceptions' into 'a collective, mythologized identity that can shut its eyes to limits',¹⁰⁸² then Stevens's invocation

¹⁰⁷⁷ Ibid., 285.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Terry Eagleton, 'Introduction: Tragedy and Hope,' in (eds.) Arthur Cools, Thomas Crombez, Rosa Slegers, Johan Taels, *The Locus of Tragedy*. Studies in Contemporary Phenomenology 1 (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008), 1-6 (pp. 5-6.)

¹⁰⁷⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 140

¹⁰⁸⁰ Wallace Stevens, 'Esthétique du Mal' VIII,' in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 320.

¹⁰⁸¹ 'Trinity and Ontology,' 164.

¹⁰⁸² Ibid., 163.

that ‘The tragedy...may have begun, / Again, in the imagination's new beginning’ is rather apt. Tragedy was birthed within an imagination, at the cusp of the Aegean, in that ‘tremulous cadence slow’ where the ‘eternal note of sadness’ was ushered in.¹⁰⁸³ At this shore, the poets invented a representation of the city, a *mimesis* of provocation which ran ‘counter to the tendency of the city and the law to reify its horizon and cast itself as wholly self-sufficient’.¹⁰⁸⁴ It is this self-sufficiency that MacKinnon, imperfectly as we have seen, tried to counter-act, and it was this tradition that Williams differently repeated in his own work. Neither of their contributions is beyond criticism. However, our study has *not* been an attempt to resolve this debate, but rather to address tensions with the aim of moving the conversation forward.

In an epigraph for his experimental film *Adieu au Langage* (2014), the French cineaste and filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard proposed this dictum: *tous ceux manquant d'imagination se réfugient dans la réalité* (‘those who lack imagination take refuge in reality’). I wonder if the tragic poets, within the pomp and bacchanals of the City Dionysia, conceived something similar: against a ‘reality’ that had become complacent and self-congratulatory, they instituted a vision that nudged us into consciousness, a renewed distance in which we might know ourselves once more – theologians included.¹⁰⁸⁵

¹⁰⁸³ Matthew Arnold, ‘Dover Beach,’ in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, (ed.) A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), 161.

¹⁰⁸⁴ David Janssens, ‘Locus Tragicus. The Problem of Place in Greek Tragedy,’ in *The Locus of Tragedy*, 9-27 (p. 27).

¹⁰⁸⁵ ‘...ce théâtre nous concerne par sa distance. Le problème n’est donc pas plus de l’assimiler que de le dépayser : c’est de la faire comprendre’ in Roland Barthes, ‘Le Théâtre Grec,’ in Guy Demur (ed.), *Histoire de spectacles*. Encyclopédie de la Pléiade (Paris : Gallimard, 1965), 513-536 (p. 536).

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